

WESTWARD TO MECCA



A STREET IN MECCA

(FRONTIS-PIECE)

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*A JOURNEY OF ADVENTURE THROUGH
AFGHANISTAN, BOLSHEVIK ASIA, PERSIA,
IRAQ & HIJAZ TO THE CRADLE OF ISLAM*

BY

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WITH PHOTOGRAPHS

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DEDICATION

*HAD ISLAM PERMITTED ANCESTOR WORSHIP
I WOULD HAVE LAID MY FOREHEAD UPON MY
FATHER'S FEET; IN THE ABSENCE THEREOF
I BEG TO DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO HIM AS
A HUMBLE OFFERING FOR DEEP SPIRITUAL
TEACHING DURING MY CHILDHOOD DAYS*

PREFACE

FOR thirteen long centuries of world's history Mecca remains the one place in the entire globe where none but the Moslims can enter. Generations of Moslim people have bowed their heads to it five times a day during their lives, and annually millions, representing every colour and clime, undertake the pilgrimage under the grilling heat to the Holy City. With their shaven heads, and clad only in one white sheet, the faithful encircle the mystic Kaaba and cling to its black curtains, while the immense colonnades of the shrine stand drenched with the holiness of centuries.

Every Moslim should visit Mecca at least once during his lifetime, and it was this Grail of my heart I wished to see. So to it I journeyed, on foot, by caravan, through fertile regions of India and the parched tracts of the desert; taking advantage of every means of progress; meeting the amusing, thrilling, even perilous, experiences to have a glimpse of Mecca—the Cradle of Islam.

What follows is an account of this protracted journey. Each experience and episode that came my way was but a link in the chain of endeavour to attain to that one great goal.

I. A. S.

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CHAPTER I

ADVENTURES IN THE HIMALAYAS

THE Moslim pilgrims of Central Asia either chose the land- or the sea-route to Mecca, but a very little known fact is that if the faithful takes the longest route he has a higher spiritual reward. The sea-route is by way of Karachi or Bombay in India, and the one by land through Afghanistan, Persia, Iraq and the desert to the City of Allah.

I chose the former road because an Indian Prince, in exchange for my services, was willing to take me up to Port Sudan, from where I could cross the Red Sea to Jeddeh in a day. Also that was the quickest route. In the meantime I was to be in the employ of the Prince, but at the eleventh hour he changed his mind as to a visit to England, and I was therefore left with no option but to trek by land; frequently kneeling at the holy shrines of Bokhara, Meshad and Kerbela on my long route, thus acquiring much merit as a pilgrim.

As to how tortuous my route became is but another

proof of the fact that fate guides men's destinies, and that fate is inexplicable.

The life in an Indian State having thus thrown me out of my route I left it with relief, and betook myself to Lahore in North India. It was stiflingly hot in Lahore. Those who have had experience of the close and hot atmosphere of the monsoon-time on the Indian plains will understand what that means. One seems always to be having a Turkish bath, and the process grows monotonous, especially when one has become limp and depressed, and seems to have exuded the last atom of energy and cheerfulness.

My thoughts turned fondly to the cool uplands of Afghanistan; the Himalayas where the thermometer drops rapidly at night and refreshing sleep comes to the weary. And towards that great wall of mountains that stand between India and China I bent my steps. In India there are millions who constantly dream of the Himalayas, and long to see them before they die, because, to the Hindu, the mountains have religious associations. Somewhere beyond the great peaks and sublime ranges lies Swarga, the Paradise of Indra, the god who slays each year the Demon of Drought and calls for rain with a voice which men refer to as thunder.

Then happily I met an old friend of my father, who had been asked to call on me. This was Mohammed Yusuf, a native of Bokhara, who had fought against the Russians when they invaded his country, and fled from it a refugee, for he was a marked man. Although old in years he was energetic and wiry, and not only was he a perfect mountaineer but he knew the language of more than one hill tribe; he knew, besides, many a secret by-way among the mountains.

He was paying a business visit to Lahore. "If you stay here," said he, "you will be baked to a cinder."

I smiled and nodded languidly. Cinder seemed the right word; a hot, dry one. But ere we reached coolness, however, we made a journey by train through dust and heat.

In time, however, our faces were turned towards the glorious Karakum range of mountains. We had to cross that portion of the Western Himalayas which lies north of the Punjab, south of Tibet, west of Bhutan and east of Cashmere. This is the region where, of old, India came in touch with the Empire of China, and through which the Buddhist missionaries travelled to teach the strange doctrines of their saint as far back as the days of the Hebrew

prophet Isaiah. This way, too, came, and still comes, another lot of folk from the opposite direction. These are the Chinese smugglers. They favoured the Kangra valley to the south, and through it brought on ponies loads of wool which was transferred afterwards to the Punjab. This wool-smuggling business should be of interest because it laid the basis of the world-wide trade in the famous Cashmere shawls. Bad roads and heavy duties have hindered the proper development of this industry on legal lines.

The mention of shawls reminds me that we had left the oven-like atmosphere of Lahore far behind and were cool, happy and full of energy, enjoying the mountains as only mountaineers can. Often, at morning and evening, Mohammed Yusuf, when he lit his cigarette, would say, "We'll have to light something bigger before long." We both smiled, thinking of what we had left. The "something bigger" was a cave-fire.

Up, up we went, up and also down. We had reached a great "table land" with mountains cropping up on it like warts, and deep gorges that seemed like old cracks in a table. Sometimes we climbed two thousand feet, only to find that we had to descend four thousand, and then had to face a

still greater climb from the very feet of the mountains to their shoulders. Our first real obstacle, however, was the river Beas which glorifies very wild scenery.

Here we enjoyed a cool bathe in a safe pool, thinking of Lahore and pitying everyone there. And what energy it gave us! One felt one could climb a ladder reaching to the moon, if necessary.

But our immediate problem was how to cross the river. Boating was out of the question, owing to the wildness of the waters and the want of boats. A couple of natives, however, conducted us to what is called "a safe crossing-place." It did not look particularly safe, but Mohammed Yusuf assured me there was nothing to fear. We were to cross by a Jhula, or rope bridge. This bridge consisted of eight or nine ropes attached to poles on either side of the river. Along the ropes slides a suspended seat which is drawn backwards and forwards. The passenger balances himself in the seat, holds on like grim death, and, if he is a novice, shuts his eyes as the seat rocks and jolts in dizzy space. I opened my eyes when half-way across and promptly shut them again. Then I scolded myself for being afraid and tried to enjoy myself even when the seat stuck for a moment and had to be jolted backward and sent

spinning ahead again at a run. I crossed safely and felt happy when I was on firm ground again. It was good to be alive!

We had now entered on real Alpine land. High, stern, tremendous cliffs bordered yawning passes and charming green valleys seemed to be scooped out at the most unexpected places. There were no jungles, but, instead, wonderful and beautiful groves of poplars in somewhat damp localities. Think of glimpses of miles and miles of these stately trees, which in the twilight, seemed to be alive as a breeze shivered through them, and they nodded their bushy heads and swayed their stumpy arms against the soft, dim sky.

North-eastward we went until we reached the town of Kulu. Here we felt that we were in a strange country indeed, so strange were the people and their customs. The women, who are darkish-brown in complexion, have long anticipated the English munition workers of war-time days for they all wear breeches and work as hard, perhaps harder, than men. They are very energetic and strong.

We had another river to cross, but not on a rope-bridge: nor were there boats, that is, ordinary boats, on the ferries. I was amazed to find that the means of crossing rivers were as ancient as Nimrod, "the

mighty hunter." One of my friends at Lahore was an archæologist and he had shown me an English book of ancient history which had photographs of old Mesopotamian sculptures that depict Assyrian soldiers crossing the river Euphrates on skin floats in the days of the Hebrew prophets. Here, in this strange land, the ancient Assyrian skin-floats are still in use.

Although the people do not look like Assyrians, or even like descendants of the "Ten Lost Tribes" who were made captives by the Assyrians, and for whom so many people have been searching all over the globe.

The skins used were those of bullocks. I learned the process of making these floats from Mohammed Yusuf. The skin is flayed by first making an incision in the back part of a hind leg. Then it is carefully removed as in the process of "casing a hare," except that the skin is cut through below and round the knee and hocks, the legs being left adhering to the body. The hide, when removed, is buried for a few days so that the hair may come off easily when rubbed by the hand. Then the skin is turned outside in, dried and prepared. It is afterwards carefully treated so as to be made airtight. The open ends of the limbs are fastened and closed

securely, one being left open for inflating the skin. Thin tar, produced from the deodar, is poured into the skin, until it is thoroughly coated inside, then the skin is tanned by steeping it in an infusion of pomegranate husks. I actually saw men preparing floats and it was an interesting process.

When the skin-float is wanted for use the waterman sits down and begins the slow and weary process of blowing it up. Fancy having to inflate a motor tyre in this way! And a bullock's skin is much larger than any tyre up among the mountains. However, the men have large chests and great power of "wind" as well as of limb. The river "waterman" is the only waterman in the world who provides wind for himself!

Then the waterman carries his boat on his back as a snail does its "house," and it is launched. The waterman knows how to balance himself in the river, and how to use, with one hand, a short oar whilst he may also paddle with the other hand. It looks easy until you try.

If a heavy load has to be taken across a ferry two skins are used. The watermen are stripped bare, keeping only white cloths round the lower part of their bodies, and turbans on their heads. We were conveyed across as "luggage," and, fortunately, had

an easy crossing. It happens occasionally, however, that a passenger gets a dip which is not as welcome an experience there as it would be if it happened at red-hot Lahore. I felt, as I went across the river on the bobbing and pitching skins, like an Assyrian traveller who was exploring an unknown world long before river-boats were shaped out of wood.

Having wild country to traverse we had to hire carriers. Our luggage, and Mohammed Yusuf's stock of things he bought and sold, were conveyed by the "Paharees" (hill-men) who had "Khaltas" on their backs. These "Khaltas" are conical baskets with flat bottoms, resembling somewhat the fish baskets carried by the fish-wives of Newhaven in Scotland. The "Khaltas" are strapped securely on the backs of the hill coolies who go "up hill and down dale" as if the "Khaltas" were as easily carried as humps are by hunchbacks.

In places where no "Khaltas" were, or could be carried, we hired men with hill ponies. These sturdy little animals are very nimble and sure-footed. There are no roads in the ordinary sense of the word, even between villages, but only bridle paths which are not always seen, and some gorges have only goat-paths. I shiver to think of these goat-paths.

The slopes we climbed were at times so steep that we had to imitate the hill-men by holding on to a pony's tail and allowing the little animal to drag us up, a thing he did cheerfully and as a matter of course. Now and again the intelligent pony looked round as if to see if one was following on foot or on one's stomach. When it crossed a little gorge it knew just how to jump and swerve so that the man grasping its tail did not tumble or slip. They are truly wonderful and intelligent animals with tails like steel ropes.

We were now well in among the Himalayas. The air was more than delightfully cool. It was at times, especially at night, somewhat sharp. Rain fell at least once a day, but almost every evening it cleared up and there were gorgeous sunsets. The weather changes rapidly here. At one moment the sky is blue as sapphire, then suddenly it darkens with heavy masses of clouds which send down a drenching torrent of rain. But as suddenly as it darkens the sky breaks and clears again, and everything glistens in dazzling sunshine.

Night comes on in great beauty, with stars of extraordinary lustre and vividness. I have tried to write poems about them. Moonrise is a wonder never to be forgotten. The silvery light sweeps into

black valleys suddenly, as the moon leaps up over a sharp mountain ridge, like a gigantic, gleaming shaft of light from a searchlight. You see the moonlight sweeping rapidly along far below just like a breeze of light, unfolding hidden wonders as it goes.

It was pleasant to travel in moonlight, especially if the day had been stormy, and we had had to sleep in a cave with a fire burning. Great-coats were absolutely necessary, for it was often very cold. Our waterproofs were not much good by day, for the rain made them as useless as wet tissue paper in a few minutes, and at night they did not keep out the icy wind.

We were not free from rain until we had crossed, partly over, and partly through by way of gorges, the tremendous and marvellous Himalayas.

Words cannot convey the beauty and glory of these amazing mountains. You feel the silence; a silence that seems always to be sinking and growing more intense. When it thunders the echoes repeat the peals over and over again, until you are unable to detect real peal from echo. A thunder-cloud thus seems to bombard you with a constant barrage. Winds are quite ghostly at night, for you hear the echoes of sudden blasts which sound very weirdly.

A gorge seems to be a haunted place. Now you hear groaning and screaming in the air above and the next moment low, echoing moans far below you, as if fettered dragons were growling in a rocky chasm and were flapping their wings in an attempt to rise.

As we went on it grew colder and colder, until I found myself wishing I had just one hour of Lahore. Snow fell frequently and sometimes the flakes looked as large as goose feathers. These accumulated rapidly until the sun came out and made water run in merry, little streams over rocks and shingle.

Leh was now not far off, but we were still among the Himalayas, and in the region where the Hindu religion prevails. We reached a hillock sacred to a Hindu cult, and in this hillock, we were told, lived a Guru. Our Hindu coolies prayed there and made offerings of sugar, ghee, etc.

The sun was now shining brightly and the air was warm in this deep, pleasant valley, when slowly a snake crept out of the hillock. The pious coolies therefore returned and told us, with sparkling eyes, that the god had made his appearance in answer to their prayers. They also tell us a legend about the gods having fled out of India chased by the demons of heat and drought. The gods took refuge among the Himalayas, where they placed serpents to guard

the faithful who sojourned there, or went past on a journey.

On we plodded slowly, and it grew colder. Beyond the serpent-guarded area the scenery became wilder and grander. At times we had glimpses of glaciers glistening in the bright sunshine. We were high up now, and the country in this mid-Himalayan region was Lahoul.

Here we reached a river which we could not ford, and so had to cross by a suspension bridge made of ropes of birch-twigs and basket-work. The bridge looked frail and a sharp gust of wind caused it to shiver, sway and make cracking sounds. Being old, as well as frail, it was undoubtedly dangerous, and we had therefore to go warily, for if one jumped to clear a hole one might make a very large hole indeed, and perhaps drop through it. I did not breathe freely until I was safely across. The natives are proud of their bridge and seem surprised if one should venture to criticize it. "Is it dangerous?" you ask. "Certainly, sahib, it is dangerous, being a bridge. Whoever heard of a bridge that wasn't dangerous?" One could only laugh, especially when disbelieved after describing a bridge of iron.

There are few villages in this area. In suitable spots the patches of good soil are well cultivated,

and women are the agriculturists, although it is not war-time. These industrious women do all the work in the fields and in their houses, and as it is cold during digging time they have to wear ear-caps as a protection against the biting winds that sweep down from the uplands of eternal snow. These women are not attractive. They grow wrinkled and haggard very quickly. Yet, although hard and constant workers, they have the usual feminine traits. Hair-dressing is a speciality. They plait their locks over their scalps and the tails hang down their backs clasped with an ornament. In front they wear a broad, cloth band adorned with bits of coloured glass. This covering is then drawn down behind and fastened by the clasp of the plait tails.

Most of the men are away all the summer transporting merchandise, but they spend the entire winter at home, obeying their wives and honouring them greatly.

The marriage customs are extraordinary. Each woman of Lahoul has at least two husbands. Some women have three or four. The only trace in India of this very much married state is in the sacred books of the "Mahabharata"—the "Old Testament" of the Hindus—which tells of a very charming queen named Draupadi, who had five brothers for husbands.

The brothers are known as the Pandavas, and scholars believe they must have come from this hill district as conquerors in ancient times.

Another extraordinary thing about Lahoul is that it seems to have no definite religion. There are strange and mysterious ceremonies, but no organized or established faith. Religion seems to be a matter of personal or family fancy. There is more magic than religion for there are no gods; just a vague sort of belief in a something, in a Power, or rather in Powers, which nobody can define or account for, and regarding which few are much concerned, excepting when something is wanted. Then one kills a goat, or does something out of the ordinary, and feels good.

This district is on the edge of the Buddhist country. From here we plodded on along the Karakum range and reached the great upland plain of Kyang, the loftiest plain in the world. Here we saw the black tents of nomads who engage in hunting wild horses. The scenery is very savage and picturesque, and the air is cold. Snow fell on the first forenoon of our arrival, and in the afternoon, when the sun came out and shone brightly it was comparatively warm.

Gradually, as we pressed onward, we drew nigh

to the Leh province where Buddhist monks live in lonely monasteries on the ledges of cliffs, and summits of rocky eminences.

We went through the Tung Lung pass, and, having crossed a shallow, prattling stream, reached the village of Ghya. Here we saw wonderful Buddhist monasteries perched in quaint, and sometimes unapproachable, places. To the loftiest of these monasteries the monks are pulled up in baskets dangling at the end of ropes. The rocks are beautiful, being of many colours and shades, and not so monotonous as they appear in a pen-and-ink sketch. On the ledges of a cone-shaped spire of rock we saw a group of monasteries. These were inaccessible as eagles' nests, and we gazed at them with astonishment. Low, long buildings built of stone, and even roofed with stone, they would look quaint even if on the level of the valley. As it was, they seemed to have been lifted up on the crest of earth waves during an earthquake.

Each of the buildings is inscribed with the Buddhist motto,

OM MANI PADME HOM

O Jewel of the lotus, Amen.

"How do the monasteries receive revenue?" I

asked, and an informant, who smiled at my ignorance, told of the unfailing supply of everything needed by the pious, and even of the important revenue derived by selling small stones, or bits of stones, from the buildings, which are treasured by pilgrims and carried away long distances. The supply of loose stones is easily kept up. In addition to the monasteries we saw a number of small cloisters, pyramidal shape, where offerings are made. On these are painted the serpent-dragons of Buddhism. These are called Nagas, and are really identical with the dragons of China and Japan. These Nagas have three forms (1) the serpent, (2) half human and half serpent and (3) entirely human with serpents curled round the neck or in the hair. Various animals are sometimes combined with the serpent. The Naga is supposed to enter the Underworld through a well at which there is a holy tree. Offerings are made at these wells, and wishes are wished at them. If you wait long enough you are supposed to see a form of the dragon in the well, perhaps a worm or a fly. Then you are in luck.

We journeyed on through this strange land of Buddhist influence which links India with China in the religious sense, till, one day, we reached a most interesting group of sacred buildings on a steep and

rugged hillside. The largest one was comparatively low down, the others were on ledges; the highest being the holiest.

In front of the lowest monastery was a row of sacred poplars; an inner row was formed by square towers with domes and short spires. The lower parts of the towers were painted white and a red stripe ran from base to summit.

The monastery proper had two or three stories and an open quadrangle in the middle. Flags were fluttering on each corner of the building. As we drew near we saw priests clad in red robes, red being the sacred colour, pacing backward and forward, lost in meditation. On their heads were mitre-like caps placed well back. Their shoes were of sacred red, and each had a red rope attached to his girdle. Their heads were completely shaven.

On asking about the higher monasteries we were told they had been abandoned on account of the cold. To these aged priests used to be hoisted up, and there they underwent great austerities; too great for human endurance, apparently.

I was specially interested in the praying-wheel which I had thought was a monopoly of Tibet. The cylinder was about ten feet in height and five or six in diameter. This one was turned by the priests, and

was believed to be specially effective on great occasions. What tremendous prayers it must have churned out! Other praying-wheels were very small, and were propelled by water. Still smaller praying-wheels were carried in the right hands of monks and kept revolving as they moved about. These resembled the little "windmills" that children use as toys. So delicately were they poised that the least breath of air caused them to revolve.

It was at Ludak, the town we were bound for, that I had a chance of seeing the Buddhist monks fully engaged in their strange religious observances. These devotees come out in great force on occasion. It was a grand sight to watch, although a trifle noisy. The chief priest tinkled a bell and, opening a book, began to chant loudly and slowly. The measured lines were repeated by those immediately behind him and passed from row to row to the end.

Soon the chanting swelled into a very loud chorus, and amidst the roar of voices trumpets were blown triumphantly, brass cymbals were crashed like stage thunder, and bells jingled loudly through the confused din. Once or twice, as the procession drew near where I stood, I closed my ears with my fingers. The final crash of religious noise-making was contributed by two immense trumpets built into the

monastery wall. According to popular Buddhistic belief they are blown by spirits. Visitors, like Mohammed Yusuf and myself, were, of course, convinced that the "spirits" were either monks with tremendous lung power, or manipulators of some mechanical contrivance like a bellows. After the trumpets had raised the noise to the highest pitch, the chanting grew gradually lower until, in the end, one heard only the humming voice of the old priest who was bringing the service to an end.

It was here, at Ludak, that my poor friend Yusuf died after a very brief illness.

It was here, too, that I heard of an alchemist who lived somewhere in this range of mountains, and was reputed to transmute baser metal into gold. My guide spoke of him with such extreme awe that I gathered he must be a sage of very great sanctity; indeed, a mahatma, as Theosophists would say. My curiosity was aroused, and I made further inquiries. These were met by the local village headmen with a show of polite nescience, and it was not until I informed one of them that I was anxious to meet the Master because I was myself a devotee of the alchemical craft that I made any headway. Had I been a European I would, of course, have got no farther. But after a good deal of trouble, and a

great deal of mystery, I was at last informed that the Master would receive me. So, at the end of a two days' tramp over the roughest country, I at last found myself in the spacious cavern where he pursued his researches.

The way to the alchemist's retreat was wild and rugged. We climbed, my guides and I, from the valley to a height almost inaccessible for our pack animals, to find, to my surprise, a valley almost upon a hilltop, above which the towering walls of the Himalayas rose for many thousands of feet. No one, unless he had known the way well, could ever have stumbled upon the entrance to the sage's cavern, hidden as it was not only by dark and giant pine trees but by a jutting rock which rendered its mouth practically invisible. An uncanny atmosphere hung about the place. The air, so high up, was grey and raw, and the herbage sparse and dusty-looking. But it was in these grim regions, not so far from the snow-line, that, as I was to learn, grew the plant which was capable of transforming base metal into gold.

Aruni—I suspect the name was an assumed one because of its ancient and classical connections—I found to be a pure Hindu of the Brahman caste, who had betaken himself to this isolated spot for the sake

of the utter quiet and freedom from interruption it afforded. At first he received me with marked suspicion and reserve. But my early training in alchemy had begun at ten years of age in Afghanistan, under the eye of a devoted student of the craft, and my subsequent researches in the literature on the subject stood me in good stead; for, after a rigorous examination, Aruni agreed to receive me as a pupil for a period of three months. I am convinced, however, that he would not have done so had he not been rather curious concerning the novel knowledge of the craft which I displayed.

He lived in the simplest manner possible, sleeping in the rear of the cave on a bed of dried grass, eating, at rare intervals, maize cakes baked over the embers of his furnace, and drinking water only. He looked askance at the provisions I had brought with me. But we were soon on excellent terms, and, after I had dismissed my guides, I bent myself to acquire the secret of his craft.

I quickly found that the Master pursued the alchemical art from no desire of wealth or common avarice. Rather he believed it, like the alchemists of old, to be a spiritual process; a means by which the restoration of nature to her original, perfect scheme might be achieved. But I would say quite

frankly that my own ideas on the subject did not altogether square with those of my venerable teacher, though I carefully avoided giving him any grounds for suspicion on this head. Would that, as it proved, I had been able to conceal my material motives.

Let me briefly outline Aruni's alchemical philosophy. According to him the transmutation of metals was accomplished by a powder produced from certain macerated herbs. The whole process, he insisted, was divinely natural and simple, and he brushed aside with contempt the more elaborate theories I placed before him. Nature, he said, was divided into male and female, and in its operations like drew to like. The original matter of metals, he assured me, was double in its essence, and consisted of a dry heat combined with a warm moisture. But he warned me against accepting these ideas in a purely literal, and in other than a spiritual, sense. "My son," he would say, "you must first purge the mortal eye before you can behold the real truth of these axioms, and that, I fear, with all your learning, you have not as yet accomplished." His words, alas, were only too true. Although attracted to the spiritual I must admit that the material has not been without its allurements for me, and, as I listened to Aruni's theory of how metals grew in the bowels of

the earth, I felt more and more that I was entering regions which, although ostensibly perspicuous enough in their atmosphere, were yet veiled for me in impenetrable clouds of allegorical obscurity.

The entire tendency of the natural kingdom, I was instructed by him, was towards the manufacture of gold, the perfect substance. The production of the baser metals was only accidental, and as the result of an unfavourable environment rendered inauspicious by malign forces. Metals were engendered by sulphur, which is male, and mercury, which is female, and the elements of all metals are similar, differing only in purity and proportion. The powder by which the baser metals might be metamorphosed into gold was the combination of the male and female seeds which beget the precious metal.

Aruni worked with copper, which he found most suitable for his purpose. As regards the manufacture of his powder, made from roots and herbs; first he "purged" this by calcining it for "thirteen moons," as he expressed it. During this phase he spoke of it as being in its "black state," in which it must be dissociated from all impurities. Then he allowed it to "putrefy," after which it became "white." The next stage was "fermentation" or the "red" stage. Before it was applied to the copper

the latter had also to be purified. But the ingredients of the mystic powder he would not confide to me, and indeed, at first, I did not ask him to do so.

On my arrival Aruni had been engaged in gathering the samples from which his powder was manufactured, and I resolved, if possible, to secure specimens of them in the raw state. I knew that to attempt to do so at first would be to court failure, so I watched my opportunity with extraordinary patience. By degrees the old man explained to me the several processes by which he purified the copper preparatory to adding the powder. He placed copper filings in a crucible over a charcoal fire, blown to a white heat by goatskin bellows worked by the feet. When it had melted, he covered the crucible with clay, hardened it in the fire, and dipped the whole in salt water, in which it hissed and bubbled. After that it was allowed to stand for a couple of days, and then it was opened, and the oxide removed.

Now was my opportunity to discover the kind of herbs with which he made the "powder of projection" as alchemists call it. But Aruni invariably gathered these at dawn, an hour when I was sleeping peacefully, dreaming of gold untold, and what I should do with it when I returned to London.

Once I lay awake all night, and when the Master arose, and went forth from the cave at sunrise, I followed him cautiously down the slope to the valley beneath. Whatever description of plant it was he sought it took a great deal of finding, for only once within the space of an hour and a half did I see him pluck anything out of the ground. This he took back to the cave, reduced it to pulp in a mortar, mixed it with mercury, and then wrapped it up in a strip of linen, coating the whole with clay. He then let it dry, dug a hole in the ground, filled it with dried cow-dung gathered in the valley, and placed the alchemical ball in the midst of this, setting fire to the dry ordure with which it was surrounded, so that it might "bake." But he would not permit me a sight of the plant, either in its natural or macerated condition.

I felt by instinct, rather than knew, that the Master suspected me of spying upon him, and little by little our relations became somewhat strained. Then one night I woke to find him bending over me. His face was within a foot of mine, and I could hear his breath coming and going in short, hissing gasps. Alarmed, I cried out, and raised my arms as though to ward off an attack.

"You called," he said. "What did you want?"

"I did not call," I replied angrily. "It is you who come spying upon me in my sleep, because you think I have penetrated your precious secrets."

"My son," he replied sternly, "your mind is vexing you. You are conscious that you have not acted according to the dictates of the sages."

Now to be informed at half-past three in the morning that you have a bad conscience, and that you are not observing rules laid down by those long dead, is scarcely conducive to continued good-temper. And I am sorry to say I lost mine.

"Dog of a Hindu!" I cried. "Who are you to teach morality to a son of Islam? You are nothing, after all, but a base empiric seeking to pose as a person of great sanctity and learning, and you are probably trying to work up a reputation as a mystic, so that you may arrange a lucrative lecture tour through the priest-ridden areas of the East."

To my amazement the old man grew suddenly dreadfully calm.

"I do not know what you mean," he replied with dignity, "and I certainly do not intend to quarrel with one from the outer world who has shown himself so grossly material as you have. As regards my ability to perform that which I 'pretend to,' that is my own affair. Enough for me to say that it was

against my better judgment that I accepted you as a pupil, for, despite all your learning, it is clear to me that you have not yet shaken off the lures and attractions of the physical world, and that you do not understand the true spirit of the grand quest."

"I crave your pardon, Master," I said formally, "but you will admit that no one likes to be awakened suddenly from sleep, and disturbed as you have disturbed me."

"It is in sudden awakening that men reveal their true characters," Aruni replied sententiously.

This remark I am sorry to say made me laugh long and loudly.

"You talk like a book, as they say," I cried, shaking with merriment. "You are ridiculous."

"In books is wisdom," retorted Aruni. This latter speech proved too much for me. I roared in ungovernable mirth. The old man drew himself up, and I could see his eyes glitter in the light of the dying furnace.

"I do not believe you to be a brother of the craft," he said gravely. "None such would conduct himself as you have done. You may have picked up its rudiments from some incautious alchemist, and you seem to have supplemented this knowledge by reading from

those books which members of the Brotherhood have through the ages seen fit to give to the world. But if you are so foolish as to believe that the grand secret is to be penetrated by mere mechanical, or bookish, knowledge alone, you err profoundly. Alchemy is an art of the soul rather than of the mind."

Now this speech nettled me, because I rather prided myself on my knowledge of the craft, although I must admit that I have never come within reasonable distance of its arcanum. Besides a clever Afghan stratagem had entered my mind.

"You add vainglory to your other follies, Aruni," I said, haughtily. "Do you think that you alone are in possession of the grand secret? And what proof have I that you are? I have never seen you project the great experiment. To-morrow let us compete according to our different methods in making the precious metal, when I will undertake to beat you on your own ground."

Of course all this was mere bluff, but to my amazement Aruni became transformed; for alchemists, like actors, poets or musicians, are easily moved to anger by any hint of superiority in method or attainment.

"What!" he almost shrieked, "you, a neophyte,

dare to pit your prowess against mine! You are ten times more foolish than I believed. I know that you boast of what you cannot do, but I will show you, aye, even now, how absurd are your allegations regarding my powers or the lack of them. Rise, and come with me at once."

I bounded from my grass bed in a flutter of excitement, and we made our way to where the crucible of prepared copper stood beside the furnace. Aruni lit a resin torch, removed the clay lid, and thrust the vessel beneath my nose.

"You see," he cried, shaking with anger, "it is merely copper, is it not?"

"True," I replied, "and copper it is likely to remain."

He made no reply, but went to that part of the cave where I had suspected he kept his stock of prepared powder of projection. He returned to the furnace and broke open the clay ball in which the powder was contained with a hammer. A fine, rust-red, calcined powder lay within, for all the world like oxide of copper. Then, heaping the charcoal on the furnace, he lifted the crucible of base metal and placed it on the fuel.

"Blow the bellows," he commanded curtly.

I did as he bid me, and soon a steady glow

resulted. He brought another bellows and we both trod steadily on the goatskin, working side by side in sullen silence. In about a quarter of an hour the copper began to run, perhaps a couple of pounds of it, and then grew red and molten.

Aruni peered into the crucible, and ordered me to keep on blowing. Then, taking a pinch of the red powder of projection, he cast it into the crucible, and he continued to blow, too, into the molten metal through a long nozzle, after the manner of the Indian goldsmiths. But gradually a subtle change stole over the surface of the metal. From a deep cherry red, it became first green, then blue, then violet, and I could see that some profound chemical change was taking place. At last the old man lifted the crucible from the furnace with a pair of tongs, laid two stones side by side and poured a spelter of the molten metal between them. As it cooled he removed it, and poured another and another until the crucible was empty.

"See!" he cried, triumphantly. "Is that gold, or is it not, fool that you are?"

I lifted one of the splatters with the tongs. It was a rich straw-yellow, the colour of the finest gold.

"It looks like gold," I admitted, my pulses

pounding with the age-long instinct of man for the precious metal, "but how am I to test it? Have you any nitric acid by which I can try its virtue?"

"I know nothing of your barbarous methods of trial," he replied, wrathfully. "I tell you that what you look on is sovereign gold of the first standard. Are you not content?"

By this time the metal had cooled sufficiently to permit me to handle it. It certainly looked like gold, and as certainly it was not copper. I placed it on one of the stones and pounded it with the hammer. It at once displayed the extraordinary malleability of finest gold.

"I believe you, Master," I said, abashed. "Forgive me, I spoke in haste. I am sorry and ashamed."

"And well you may be," replied the sage. "See the sun is rising. It is another day. Go now, and return not to this place. You have been a fool, and must suffer for your folly in a manner which you shall regret all your days."

In vain I begged, entreated to be allowed to remain, even in the humble capacity of a servant, a mere assistant. Aruni was adamant. Nor would he give me even the smallest particle of the gold, or the least pinch of the powder to carry away with me.

Indeed, he scarcely addressed another word to me, but turned his back upon me with every sign of contempt. There was nothing for it but to go, and a sense of having done an injury to one whom, at heart, I really respected has restrained me from returning at any time.

But that I saw gold made in that Himalayan cavern I then profoundly believed. That I had beheld the actual commission of the great act; the unveiling of the grand secret, without comprehending its process; and not once but a thousand times since did I curse the folly and cupidity which ruined my chance of ever acquiring a knowledge of the formula of the arcanum. You of the West may smile at my story and disbelieve it. All I have to say in reply is that it contains nothing which is not the truth. But there is a sequel.

As I thought then, it might be, as Aruni declared, that alchemy is in reality a craft of the spirit. But what I witnessed appeared to me as a purely physical experiment, and I could only conjecture that alchemists throughout the ages have veiled what is actually a purely chemical process by mystery and allegory. At the same time, I wondered why Aruni and his like, if they really manufactured gold in sufficient quantities to bring them a fortune, did not

take advantage of the material comforts which wealth brings in its train. To what purpose did Aruni employ his wealth? Did he merely bury it in the earth in the assurance that he had assisted Nature in returning to her pristine state of perfection?

During the twenty years and more in which I have studied alchemical science, I have encountered so many divergent viewpoints that, frankly, I am bewildered. Probably, as Aruni said, I am not sufficiently far advanced on the spiritual road to comprehend these mysteries and collocate them into one perspicuous and homogeneous code of simple truth, as he then seemed to have done.

But for the sequel. A full three months must have passed subsequent to this event, and my experiences with the alchemist had been crowded out by much tramping, for I was then working my way down to the borderland of India. At any rate on a particularly hot evening, I sat with the English Superintendent of Police when his men reported the arrival of a gang of coin counterfeiters with the Hindu Pilgrims from the Himalayan uplands. The police officers sought the permission of their high official before arresting the offenders, especially because the head of the gang was reputed to be a "holy man," who could transmute baser metal into

gold, in addition to being able to sit for hours on a bed of spikes.

Believing this to be one of those matters which sorely try an English official every day of his service in India I gave no further thought to the affair, although my curiosity was certainly excited. But when, some weeks later I was again dining with the same official, I asked him about the case of the "holy man."

"Oh," he said, "it was a unique case. The man posed as a fakir of great sanctity, tracing his ancestry from the Clan of the Moon itself. He used to melt the copper, and when that metal was a mass of molten red, he asked his disciples to blow the goatskin bellows hard, whilst he himself, pretending to increase the flame by puffing through a long nozzle, passed small balls of pure gold, concealed in his mouth, through that nozzle into the copper, and when sufficient gold had been added to the metal in the crucible he used to proclaim that elixir had been added, and that transmutation had occurred. The gaping crowds thereupon used to place their offerings before the alchemist. Later he counterfeited coins also."

This brought very vividly to my mind the art which I had sought in the Himalayas, and I felt

intensely interested to see the alchemist. My astonishment can therefore be better imagined than described when I saw the self-same alchemist, Aruni, of my experiences on the Roof of the World, behind the bars of the prison cell. And I felt that it must have been the same manipulation which that master of alchemy must have resorted to before my eyes, then blinded by superstition. Recognizing me, he hung his head in shame, and began to twist his rosary beads in his fingers.

So I left him and tramped my way down to the Frontier Province which divides India from Afghanistan.

CHAPTER II

THE DANGER TRAIL OF THE FRONTIER

ON entering the wild glens of the borderland a feeling of contrast came upon me. A contrast of ages it was, for I thought that the ultra busy West, chasing the phantom of material happiness, does not tarry to think that she is the innocent cause of an awakening in modern Asia. Nor ponders over this curiosity of human evolution; that this bestirred East is no other than that which she looked upon as a region of inactive and immovable peoples.

The Oriental world of our generation is as different from the ancient East as the poles apart. The new one with an eye on the main chance, the other hungrier for knowledge than for gold. The result of this Western impact has been that the Eastern does not now feel at all contented "to let the legions thunder past and plunge in thought again." And although the signs of revival are unmistakable, and progress in this direction assured, the whole matter has given rise to grave concern in the minds of many Eastern thinkers. They do not like it.

I have met not an inconsiderable number of sages, grey-beards, in almost all the remote parts of Asia, who shake their heads over the rapidity with which this Westernization of the East is "tarnishing the ancient glory of Asia, scraping off the real Oriental colour, putting on the gloss foreign in nature and superficial in character," as they put it. Maybe that they are too old, some may even think that they lag behind the times, but if their observation is incorrect, then it will be the one solitary instance when they have misread the situation, and the progress of history can only prove the wisdom or the falsity of such a pronouncement.

In the meantime, however, one notices this Europeanization as near as Angora, and as distant as Kabul and Peking. In its progress it has to fight its way against age-long traditions and ideas. Often it is delayed when it comes up against fanatical prejudices, but it continues to fight its victorious battle. It has already fully conquered both Egypt and Turkey. It is sweeping over Asia; flowing eastward unhampered; carrying even the conservative Afghans before it, till it comes up against the mountain-locked region of the North-Western Frontier. A strip of country barely more than twenty-five miles broad, and extending in length

from the Pamirs in the north to Baluchistan in the south, a distance of little less than eight hundred miles, which separates India from Afghanistan. At the gates of this borderland country Western influence is called upon to halt, and it is perhaps one of the few regions in Old Asia where the real East still lives.

To most people the Frontier Province is spelt in terms of rapacious brigandage, clan wars, murders, and all phases of unspeakable crimes known to history. To a few it is familiar through punitive expeditions which the Indian Government sent to reprimand clansmen; and further knowledge scarcely reaches the light of day about people which, as I have said, are more truly the representatives of Old Asia than even the Chinese poet watching the flight of the geese on an autumn evening, and writing poetry about them.

In the first place, let us not forget that this borderland holds in its lap the famous Khyber Pass—the most strongly fortified, natural highway in the world—through which practically all the important invasions of India have passed. The ancient Greeks wrote ballads in honour of Scylax who, by way of the Khyber, reached India two thousand five hundred years ago. The last of the invaders, Baber, in the

early sixteenth century, crossed the pass to found the great Moghul Dynasty which ruled India till the advent of the British.

It was only during Lord Curzon's Viceroyalty in India that the North-West Frontier Province was formed, with Peshawar as its headquarters. Its political history is nothing but a tragic story of clansmen's attacks and British punitive expeditions. All efforts to "civilize" have failed, and on the day the frontiersman changes his speech and dress must be reckoned the end of a virile, valiant and warlike race of Asia. The constant friction which, happily not so acute now, exists between the sons of the Khyber and the British is sometimes due to the fact that the borderman cannot change his mode of life. To appreciate this point some details about the country and its people will not be without interest.

A number of clans inhabit this far and wild frontier from the north to the south. There are, for instance, Afridis, Yusufzai, Shinwaris, Zaka Khail, Osman Khail, Masuds and many others. Each clan lives within a certain area, inhabiting a region amongst the hills or glens specified by its ancestors. The number of its members may be large or small, yet in its political entity no clan can tolerate the ceding of any ascendancy to its neighbour. That



ZAKA KHAIL AFRIDI TRIBESMEN. THE NEIGHBOURS OF
THE AFGHANS IN THE KHYBER PASS

is a distinctive feature of the individual also, for each member of a clan, however humble his means, ranks equal to another, barring, of course, the "elder" of the clan, who is a grey-beard, and claims government over his tribe, as often as not, by virtue of heritage.

The country is, however, divided by somewhat indefinite limits into "independent" and "settled or administered areas." People living under the independent system inhabit the interior of the hills, and prefer aloofness. In many cases, indeed, they enjoy a truer form of "independence" than even certain European states, for they owe allegiance to no one, and will not barter their abject poverty, or strenuous toil, for another system of government, however benign.

Perhaps it is the geographical conditions of their country which have invested them with such "peculiar" traits of character. They are unlike both the Indians and the Afghans, because the frontier is so different topographically from India and Afghanistan. The hills in which their lurking-places are situated are bare and almost devoid of animal or vegetable life. Here and there tufts of dry grass cluster on the parched brown soil, and now and again a partridge may start up at the feet of the traveller with a shrill cry and a whirring of wings. But on

the whole a more desolate wilderness—treeless, shrubless, lifeless—can scarcely be imagined. The earth refuses him a living, unless, by dint of great hardship, he cultivates a patch on the banks of a mountain torrent, or herds a few half-starved sheep or goats from water-course to water-course. The independence it grants he values more than life itself, and he will fight for his half-cultivated patch of soil as fiercely as if it were the richest of possessions. Outside the walled and towered villages in that country I have seen men ploughing behind their oxen with rifles slung over their shoulders, and with every sense on the alert for the sudden onslaught of a possible enemy. Their well-filled cartridge-belts were strapped round their waists, a straight long knife stuck in the kamarbund, ever ready for work. Seeing them live this life generation after generation, with the fear always of an unknown enemy, under such inhospitable conditions, there can be but few just men who cannot admire this race in the heart of Asia.

Then there are the so-called “administered areas,” inhabited by the same stock of people, speaking the same language, Pashtu, and belonging to the same religion, Islam; but with this difference, that they are under British rule. The regions of

Peshawar, Kohat and others, are of this class, where British law, tempered by local usage and conditions, is administered. There is no doubt, however, that the efforts of the Government of India to bring an appreciable amount of peace and comfort amongst the warlike tribes under their rule have not always been in vain. A great deal has been done, for instance, towards improving agriculture, and I have witnessed green tracts of country around the town of Shubqadar where both the canal and the hill streams have materially benefited the warrior-farmers of the mountains.

Policing the country against both foreign aggression and tribal raids has not always provided the British authorities there with restful sleep at nights. But it is a wise course that this work of watch and ward is entrusted chiefly to the local people themselves, and their services are generally well paid. The work of holding the Khyber Pass can at best be but a thankless task, for, although police and militia outposts crown almost all the hilltops in both the Khyber and the Bolan Pass regions, yet events as recent as 1919 go to show that these passes cannot be held by mere force of arms. Local influence and the goodwill of the people of the frontier is a better guarantee than a hundred battalions. How far those

local sympathies can be retained and by what means, is outside the province of this narrative.

But I cannot leave the subject without remarking that a railway line which was opened in the Khyber at the end of 1925, and regarding which so much secrecy was maintained, is unworthy of the importance with which some strategists invest it. In plain words it is an extension of a military railway-system beyond Jumrood to Dekka on the Afghan border line. This line is a commendable piece of engineering, though not so wonderful as some mountain railways in Europe, in Italy for example. To the uninitiated it was said that the railway was being built for commercial purposes. But even the untutored merchant of the wilds did not credit that explanation, for when he had loaded his camels at Kabul, bound for Peshawar—a distance of about two hundred miles—he did not think it worth while to unload his camels at Dekka and use twenty-seven miles of Khyber railway to transport his merchandise.

As a means of rapid transport of war material or troops it is equally a useless effort, for when it is realized that a single boulder, hurled down by a single man from the top of a hill, can block any tunnel of the railway, and that the sentry of the tunnel forms a good target for a sniper, the extent of possible



IN THE KHYBER PASS. CARAVAN ON ITS WAY TO KABUL

damage can be imagined. Furthermore, the removal of the railway lines is the easiest thing on earth for the tribesmen. It would, indeed, be nothing more than sport to the boys of the village to indulge in this, if their elders dropped a mere hint.

The nature and the extent of the misgivings which the construction of this useless railway has given rise to in Afghan minds can be left to the nationals of the King Amanullah's country to determine themselves. How far the people of Kabul consider it as a threat to their independence I need not attempt to answer. Suffice it here to add that the Afghans, perhaps being alive to the impotency of the Khyber railway, did not protest against its construction, as they did when Russia extended a railway from Merv to its northern border at Kushk post many years ago.

The progress of Western influence has not failed to effect the "administered areas" in the Frontier Province of India, specially Peshawar and the regions that encompass it: for the city folk, certainly due to an ever increasing contact with Europeans, are aspiring to vie with other provinces of India and seek those benefits with which the neighbouring provinces in British India are blessed by the Reforms Acts.

In a word they now demand a provincial Govern

ment, a representative Assembly, Ministers and the attendant paraphernalia. So far, on account of political and strategical reasons, or so it was alleged, the Montague-Chelmsford reforms were not extended to the North-West Frontier Province of India. But only during the last session of the Legislative Assembly, despite vigorous Hindu antagonism, it agreed to extend it. As to when it will be extended was not, however, specified, and it undoubtedly leaves many a political thinker to draw his own conclusions about it.

But much as one might deplore a complete Westernization of that stronghold of what is best in the East, there remains no doubt in my mind that certain impulses of modern science and education have immensely benefited these people of the frontier. They are a naturally gifted and adaptable race of men, born fighters and tacticians, and wherever in their composition the proper Western element has entered they have not revolted.

Nawab Sir Abdul Qayum Khan of Peshawar, a true representative of his race and traditions, is a living refutation of Kipling's lines, "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." For, indeed, are East and West really so far apart as

some would have us believe? Do the people of Asia look on the world so differently from the Europeans that it is not possible to find a common meeting ground? The average Easterner is not a symbol of the East, nor is the average Westerner necessarily typical of the West. Average men represent commonplace conditions of life and thought; they are puppets of environment. You cannot judge the whole race of frontiersmen by the marauding adventures of some outlaw any more than you can judge the entire English race by a prisoner at Old Bailey. Not average men but men endowed with capacity and intellectual development are really capable of representing their race, and of interpreting the inner life—"the life of life" as Shelley puts it—of which average men in all lands are but pale and sometimes distorted reflections.

In their domestic affairs they practise the highest form of chivalry and magnanimity. There are two words which are ever on the clansmen's tongue, *Izzat* and *Sharam*. Both mean "honour"; that which must be guarded from shame at all cost; and if a slight is placed upon his honour the possessor deems it can only be wiped out in blood.

The importance that is attached to *Izzat* and *Sharam* is perhaps the greatest feature in the life of

a tribesman, as my travels through that region convinced me rather dramatically. I was visiting a border chief, and being proud of his new motor-car he wished me to travel by it to another of his villages. Our motor sped on its way down the zigzag hill road to the distant borderland village. Gradually clumps of mulberry trees and stacks of chopped hay, indicated our destination. A few minutes more and we reached the cross-roads. Lumbering camels led by swarthy, warlike Pathans, armed to the teeth; rustic bullock carts, pulled by dreamy-eyed oxen, herds of sheep and goat enveloped in the dust of their own making, and in the midst of all these our car formed a queer procession linking Adam's time to our own.

On the rocky hilltops, far away, wild figures of frontiersmen walked mysteriously, as if endeavouring to put out the tremendous conflagration of the setting sun, and the dying rays struck red on their rifles.

On entering the turret-crowned gate of the village the Call from the minaret of the mosque, "God is Great, God is Great," was bestirring the people to prayer, and we too hurried our steps to swell the ranks of the faithful.

After the evening prayer a right royal feast was

given in honour of the visiting mullah, and the visit was taken advantage of to settle a village feud.

Young and old gathered in the public square after the feast, the Elders seating themselves round the mullah in the centre. The question was, how far a poor sword-maker, Akram Khan, was justified in stabbing the trusted servant of Sunjar, a rich, gay Lothario of the village, and, being unable to pay blood-money, what recompense was he to make.

"Let the murderer speak, let his blood flow," they shouted, but a hush fell upon the gathering as the sword-maker's gaunt figure stretched itself to its full height.

"I, Akram Khan," he said, with defiance, "have killed the hired poltroon. I have slain him at my own door-step with this." An Afghan blade shone in his hand. "A long line of warriors have I, and in their name I will not barter the esteem of my clan for a hundred Sunjars."

On this the village youths lost control, snatched burning faggots from the bonfires, or felt for their large knives or guns. This son of a sword-maker thus challenged them, and, even there, they would cut him up, or burn him limb by limb. In this tumultuous scene, however, Akram Khan was under-

stood to say that the murdered man sought to disgrace his house, which he would defend alone, if needs be, against the whole village.

"Speak the truth, speak the truth, thou, O villain," shrieked an old man. "Thou hast killed my only son. O my son, O my son." Large drops from his eyes trickling down his venerable beard as he spoke chokingly. The mullah with great difficulty pacified the excited crowd to further listen to the defence of Akram. "The blood of the man is not on my head," he protested before the infuriated people, "it is on Sunjar, who employed the man."

"O, but, how strange. What evil dost thou speak?" shouted the rich man. The father of the victim, no longer upright, struggled to stand up, but fell down on the ground. "Thou shalt be slain," he cried, trembling under the calamity that had fallen upon him in his old age. "Say what thou mayst, thou wilt be killed. Thou shalt be stabbed as my son was stabbed. The blood of my son lies at your door."

The mullah once again restored order, when Akram began again by asking, "Know you this Sunjar, this rich man?" None replied to an obviously absurd question. "Well," he said, "you

think you do, but you do not. I alone of the village know him, for I took pains to find out as to who he was before he came here. He is of low birth, and although he crossed the Khyber thrice to sell his Kabul ponies in India, and returned with more than six belts full of gold coins of the Ferunghis, and bought lands and orchards, he could not buy ancestry. His blood remained low."

All this explanation, however, did not appear in the eyes of the judges of the villages, and specially in those of the mullah, as a sufficient reason for killing a man. Even the looks of the Akhunzada were darkening as he told his beads more rapidly. "But, tarry, men of the village, more will I speak," said Akram. "Being low born with no ancestry he sent his servant with presents to me, seeking the hand of my daughter. A low-born seeking the hand of the daughter of a warrior, it meant, and that could only be wiped out in blood; that insult to the name of my house."

The Akhunzada stopped twisting the beads of his rosary upon this. Grey-beards eyed each other in astonishment. Red began to mount in the faces of the young; the youths hung their heads as in shame. Such a thing was never heard of on the borderland.

"And when I knew," explained the sword-maker in an assured tone, as if throwing in his last card, "that a man not only of low parentage, but also bearing a wound in his back indicating cowardice in battle, was seeking the hand of a warrior's daughter, I stabbed the bearer of the proposal as my answer to his master."

The mullah nodded approvingly, and lifted his hands in prayer, said, "So had Allah written," and Akram's actions were thus completely vindicated; for so also had the mullah decreed.

After this trial, the preliminaries of welcome to me in that frontier village, and an enormous feast, the celebrations were ended. I was now to accompany my host on his night patrol amongst the hills of the Khyber Pass.

But although it was his wont, as a chief, to examine personally, every night, all outposts of his village against hostile attacks of rival clansmen, and to travel at dusk in disguise, yet, that night, he told me that he was taking me somewhere the locality of which I must not ask any questions till we actually got there.

His baggy trousers were tucked well above his ankles; he wore his turban low, with the end across his mouth, not only according to the frontier travel

custom—so that no dust might enter the mouth—but that his face might be only half visible. Both an Afghan knife and a revolver were tucked in his girdle. In this fashion I too was dressed, and we climbed the rugged pathway up the Khyber defiles, in and out of the narrow and tortuous alleys; now ascending by pulling ourselves up by the roots of some half parched bush, now sending the pebbles in descent rattling down the hillside, which seemed like thunder in that dark silence; stopping here and there to make certain that no one had heard us; for men of a hostile clan have ears sharper than those of wolves, and would send a shower of bullets at us instead of a challenge.

Following no path, winding between boulders and slippery pebbles, I toiled on behind my companion. A cloud covered the half moon and stars and plunged the scene into utter darkness. At least thrice I lost my foothold. I could feel the sharp edges of the stones through the soles of my boots, but I dared not lag behind.

At one point, stretching my hand out in the darkness to something that appeared like a tuft of grass, I was startled at the touch of a slithery, soft rock lizard, and, losing my balance, made a false step, sending a fairly large stone clattering down the

hill. As it hit the edge of the precipice with a crash, my heart very nearly stopped beating. The noise did its mischief, for, at once, a shrill challenge from the gloom above bid us tarry, and inquired as to whom we were. I owe my life to the presence of mind of my companion, who, whilst cursing me for having so degenerated by walking in the well ordered and level roads of Europe, pulled me behind a boulder. Hardly had we sunk close to it when footsteps approached to where I had slipped, and after a futile search melted away in the distance.

I was more dead than alive, as we proceeded on our journey to a destination totally unknown to me. The valley broadened into the basin of the Kabul River, and soon the distant thudding of drums intermingled with the barking of village dogs somewhat steadied me. Soon was I seated in a sumptuously furnished apartment of Sultan Khan, quaffing cup after cup of green tea, and giving no more thought to the adventurous journey.

A late supper and innumerable cups of tea having warmed us up a bit I asked my host how it was that a strip of the country was so enemically disposed towards him when large tracts of land belonging to him lay on either side of it.

"It is due to a woman," he said, fixing his gaze



FORTIFIED VILLAGES OF THE TRIBESMEN IN THE KHYBER PASS,
EASTERN AFGHANISTAN

on me, and uncovering his head he ran his fingers through his long hair in suppressed agitation. "Yes, I say, women have been no good to me, and thuswise it happened.

"Before that grey-bearded father of mine died, and I became the Chief, he spoke once, twice and a thousand times to me to wed, but wedding I did not wish. The old Chieftain thought of the title of the house and its retention in our family through my children, for he saw in me too wild a spirit even for a Khyber man. For I love to send bullets through my opponents' heads and invite theirs, whilst showing them how well I can avoid their mark. And thuswise I wished always to dwell. Besides, never could I think of being able to spare time from my warring to stroke a wife, and hear her gentle purr. A man of tulwar and a woman live apart.

"When I saw that my father had made up his mind that I must have a wife right or wrong, I had likewise made up my mind not to have one. I set forth thinking to go to Afghanistan, but little chance of raiding will there be there I thought, as they have framed laws, and laws are no good to anybody. I will hie myself to the south, slay a Khan and seize his lands; people would then hear my name as a great warrior and flock to me. I might even be a

King of Delhi, who knows? Many things were in my mind.

“ I journeyed far and wide as a holy man and as a Hakeem turn-about. Green valleys and parched hills did I transverse, till I saw the fire-carriage of the Jerangi; the fire-carriages, which were swiftly moving, packed with white soldiers, to the Quetta hills. Of a truth the might of the fire-carriage overawed even me, and my heart wished to conquer its force. Long I sat devising means to that end, hidden behind a pipal tree, then, nothing occurring to me, I resolved to at least get inside one of its wooden rooms. Full two nights did I hide seeking an opportunity from the mulberry grove behind which the empty wooden rooms of the fire-carriage stood.

“ It was just after the rich gloaming of the hills was fading that I stole into one of its rooms. When it started, praise be to Allah, it ran faster by far than any hill pony. I said so to the Ferunghi sitting opposite me in the compartment. He was startled by my voice, for he read a paper considering himself alone. But he had not perhaps been long in the frontier, otherwise he would have known that the wild men of the Khyber need not get in the carriage by the proper door, nor necessarily when the carriage is at a stand still.

“His young face showed little concern beyond a surprise, and, although there was the chance to slay him, I somehow felt sorry for him when he told me that it was his mother’s letter that he read. A widowed old mother was his, who lived in a land beyond seven seas, and he had left her to serve his country. I thought him brave like myself, for had not I left my valleys to brighten my clan’s name, and I thought brave men should better live. Especially did I not kill him because his revolver case hung carelessly on a peg from which he did not notice my extraction of his weapon. The possession of his fire-arm I considered sufficient when I leaped into the gloom of a way-side station whilst the fire-carriage was still moving slowly.

“I slept in a wheat field at night. It was a larger village than I had seen on the frontier where, in the morning, I strolled, and found myself looking hungrily at the heap of long, red fruit which a Hindu sold by weight. A whole rupee’s worth would I have of this new fruit of Hindustan. The Hindu desisted somewhat in weighing, and asked me whether I was sure that I wanted as much as a rupee’s worth. I can’t bandy words when hungry, so in reply I only half showed my Afghan blade. To my delight he gave me a load of it.

“Hardly had I eaten two fruits, red, thin like fingers they were, when I discovered that I did not relish the taste. They made my tongue smart, my mouth aglow, tears began to appear from my eyes, my nose began to run. I felt ill, and my blood was up. ‘What,’ I said, ‘a warrior like me to feel thus by eating Hindustan fruit!’ I ate more, a handful to see whether the first feeling could be killed by additional eating, but it made matters worse. My forehead began to throb, I began to perspire, my mouth was in flames. I could hardly see my way by my tear-dimmed eyes. But when the Hindu boys ran after me clapping their hands, as if following one demented, and shouting ‘look at the man of the hills eating the hot chillies by the handful,’ I felt that the limit of human endurance had been reached. As my agony increased I swore that not only would I have the blood of the man who sold the fruit to me, but also that of everyone in the village.

“At least thrice did I draw my knife and eat of the fruit refusing to be beaten. My eyes began to swim in my head as I threw myself on the reed stool beside a booth in the village fair. And whose shop dost thou think it was? The same wretched chilli sellers. There did I lose my senses. I jumped at the person weighing the satanic fruit, and fastened

my teeth in my victim's neck. After a scramble I escaped, and was glad to find myself once again under the shadows of my native Khyber Pass.

"As I reached the village which is now hostile, and through which you and I passed to-night, I saw a woman at the sight of whom such sensations arose in my mind as I had not known in battle. I then thought that that feeling must be love, and resolved forthwith to wed the daughter of the priest, as she was, even if I had to slay the father should he refuse his daughter's hand to me.

"My clansmen, hearing of my return, took me to my village, and made me the chief, because my father had died in the meantime; but the mullah's daughter they would not have as my wife, and that explains her living in this village as my wedded partner in life. The neighbouring chief's daughter I would not wed, so he waged war upon me. But battle I do not mind; what puzzled me most was how to adequately celebrate the wedding, as I had no money. A Hindu money-lender in Peshawar volunteered to assist, and how the cash was got and the claim met is a story that is better told by the Chief Scout himself!"

At this command a gaunt son of the wild Khyber, who sat at the edge of the carpet, and whose presence

I had not noticed before, came forward, and having been introduced to me as the Chief Scout, Prime Minister and general factotum all combined, began :

“ The story of the money-lender,” he said, and a mischievous light played in his eyes, “ is soon told. All that we wanted was a thousand rupees for the wedding, and, after the sum was got and spent, thrice did I take eleven hundred rupees to the Hindu money-lender in Peshawar to pay off the debt, and thrice did he return the money, saying that he was in no hurry for the repayment. But after the third year he put in an application in the Ferunghi (British) court of India demanding ten thousand rupees as principle and interest. The glib tongued Babu talked for hours in the court, pressing the claims of the money-lender, and the white Judge, looking through many books of law said that my master must pay. But my master did not see eye to eye with that judgment. Thereupon I went to the Hindu with three thousand rupees, which he accepted as part payment, and had me flung in a gaol as a guarantee for the payment of the balance.

“ But gaol cannot keep a son of the Khyber for long, and within two days I had escaped and had got back to my village. My master now resolved to

take the law in his own hands. He sent the balance to the money-lender and apologized for having inconvenienced him. He also offered to send presents to him when his clansmen came to Peshawar for their monthly shopping. This was necessary otherwise the money-lender would have had the English court keep a ban on the entry of our men into the British territory.

“One day a bridal procession, trekking down from the Khyber Pass, approached the gates of Peshawar. The bridal litter was followed by other covered litters bearing the dowry articles, and there were quite two hundred others. Music from the small drums added to the charm of the occasion, whilst all the best swordsmen of our village gaily danced, whirling themselves about, slashing the air with their Afghan blades, all the way as we passed through the streets of the town. From the storytellers’ bazaar through the food market, then by way of the cloth mart to the goldsmiths’ lane, the procession moved, and when I, being in the rear, saw the procession well inside the narrow street of the bankers’ and the litters arrived close to the money-lender’s house, I gave the signal. The curtains of the litters were thrown open, every man took his rifle from the heavy load in the litters, and a shouting,

yelling pack of the wild Khyber men swept upon the money-lender's house.

"Pickets held both ends of the street whilst not a sou did we spare for the Hindu. Papers, gold, silver, notes, everything we bundled up. Locking his womenfolk in a cell, a dozen of the stoutest of us bore the fainting, begging money-lender with the booty across the Mulberry avenue surrounding the city, and I saw our pickets exchange shots to cover us from the frontier armed police as we climbed up and on into the vastness of the Khyber.

"What a welcome did we get at the village! Pounds of gold ornaments, silver and coin in heaps, were distributed amongst the gallant members of the band. It was five times more than we ever paid to the money-lender for his debt. As to the notes we were not sure. Papers we burnt, and my master saw the yellow page of the English court, bearing his thumb impression for the debt of a thousand rupees, in the flames. We held the fat Hindu at ransom for ten thousand rupees, or twenty rifles, and when I pushed him across the border line, after the receipt of ransom, I for one was glad not to have had him as my share of booty, as he was so particular about his food. Besides he had many other ways of a heathen! "

My host did not exactly run a story-teller's club, but when the night is dark, men have feasted themselves and the watch on the village tower is placed, every lad of the village delights to recount his exploits. And so it was when another began his experiences.

“Knowst thou the mullah who came from the north and cured the dying child of my brother by the recitation of the holy formula, and healed my uncle's elbow-wound by touching it with a green stone? Remember thou the day of the Ferunghi's afrit, with wondrous wings, droning above the valley and crashing against the Khyber rocks that stab the sky at the mullah's behest. That day I pinned my faith in the mullah's saying, ‘that all who wage a holy war will go straight to Paradise.’ Even all the men of Jawakai kissed his hands, and he spoke of heaven and hell; of the faithful and the unbelievers; of the pleasures of life eternal in Allah's garden for the Ghazis who dispatches a Kafir. That sermon of the mullah made my blood run quicker, for was not the coolness of Allah's bowers better than existing amongst parched hills in the belly of broiling heat? And forthwith I resolved to slay a Kafir, a Hindu, or a Ferunghi, but better a Ferunghi, for the Ferunghi's rifle is worth possessing.

“So, tying the mullah’s charm on my right arm, and securing an additional knot in the red rag in the thorny bush at the door of the old Priest as a token of good luck, I sallied forth, even against my father’s bidding, and the darkness of the valley swallowed me as I picked my way to the robbers’ lair. Brigand I did not want to become, but in the robbers’ company alone could I get near enough to the object so dear to me, and win martyrdom. Many a caravan we pounced upon, and I did not lag behind, but near enough to a Ferunghi I could not get. My spirit often revolted at this loot, for I wanted no wealth. I love fighting and the men for the Caravan, it appeared, learnt no fighting in their trade. They either fled leaving their all to our band, or hid behind unconcealing boulders, while bullets from their shaking hands flew wide. Nor were they skilled in wielding their Afghan knife, above all no Ferunghis travelled with them, and I began to tire of that business. As a warrior it had no glory, nor as a Ghazi was I nearing my goal. And that wise I proposed not to dwell.

“And then came the chance of my life when I first met the Ghazi, and his associates who would have blood of the Kafirs; martyrs all. Whatever might have been the motive of others my blood was

hot against the Kafirs, and often did I think of what the mullah had said of the reward of martyrdom. So it was that the raid was arranged. Our scouts had manœuvred the ground for days, and upon Ferunghis' bungalows we had decided to sweep down. They selected me to cover the retreat, but that did not suit me at all, for as not only my fame was in all men's mouths but also eager as I was to slay a Kafir, I would also be in at the kill. I proposed instead to proceed first and give the signal for the attack.

"A moonless night it was, too, and warily we went, uphill and downhill, climbing or descending the sheer smooth faces of the bare rocks yet warm with the day's sun; slipping and sliding and saving a headlong plunge into the yawning chasm by grasping like grim death at some stunted, hard shrub; crawling and crouching we went on up and down, till well past the last range of hills. Away in the darkness stood the greater darkness of the British town, and tiny lights indicated the Ferunghis' houses. My heart leaped with joy at the sight of it. What followed is known. The Ferunghi could not be found. I searched high and low for him whilst others looted and the white Memsahibs raised the alarm. Some coward amongst us delivered the

blow. That dog I would like to slay myself even now, for we wage no war on women and children. But who it was none yet knows. Nor will it ever be known.

"No, the blood of women does not lie at my door," he continued chokingly, "mine is a delight of possessing an English rifle, and by such craft did I do it three years ago that praises were sang for me throughout the borderland and fame was brought to my home. Knowst thou the story of my further doings at Peshawar? Then, thou shalt listen.

"In Peshawar where I then stood many white soldiers dwelt, and from that treasure house of fire-arms I would have weapons. Cunningly did I watch the sentry do duty, from far-off fields, and there it was, too, that I noticed a party of them, a little after the noonday prayer, marched clad in white half trousers, to a field close by and chased a ball about. Some kicked it, others handled it, they ran after it like madmen, now huddled together, now tumbling, yelling, shouting and then stopping at the sound of a whistle, to give a rest to the ball as it seemed to me. I saw the sentry take much interest in that game and there lay my chance. Behind the trees I hid till dusk, and then crept towards the sentry till I reached a large empty cask. Accommodating myself in that

I rolled it along towards the magazine, thus gaining two or three feet when the sentry's back was turned. In the darkness of the night the rolling mass did not attract the man's attention, and rising wind drowned the noise of the cask's movement, till, thus concealed, I was within eight yards of him. A number of other empty casks near the sentry there were in which it took me at least two hours to range myself. The click of his boots, and the smart slap over the butt of his rifle at each turn of his round, was adding to my excitement. Crouching like a leopard, and with his agility, I was behind the other cask used to hold water from the roof of the magazine, and just a yard from which the sentry always took his stand on his way back from the other end of his path. Gluing myself to the side of the cask, I caught my breath as I heard him approach, traack, traack, traack. He came nearer and nearer, and within an arm's length he stood motionless.

"Blessing the souls of all the hero-spirits of the Khyber, I leaped at him like a flash. He had no chance; both my hands twisted his neck; he fell unconscious, and taking not only his rifle and cartridges but another two from the rack, I was beyond the furthestmost English block house within half an hour.

“ ‘ Who goes there ? ’ they challenged, and fire leaped out of a loophole from the top of the Khyber outpost : but it was too wide. And then to speak of rejoicing. Never was there a greater welcome than that for Gul Akbar with three rifles. I felt like the King of Delhi himself.”

This story-telling would have gone on for days together, but the last watch from the village-turret was being lifted, and the mullah’s voice rose from the mosque in the long sonorous call, “ Allaho Akbar, Allaho Akbar ! ” he was summoning the faithful to the morning prayer. After this was over I was escorted to Malakand, and from thence took train to Peshawar.

CHAPTER III

HIGHWAYS AND BYWAYS OF AFGHANISTAN

THE sound of quick firing greeted me as I stepped out of the compartment at Peshawar railway station. The restaurant car had been detached from the train some hours before so that I was looking forward to a good feast at my destination; but excitement dispelled my hunger, for a mere handful of tribesmen were raiding the neighbourhood, and as rifle pleasantries were being exchanged between the wild men of the Khyber Pass and the Guards I had to wait at the station till all was quiet.

There is something in the air of the Frontier Province that makes its sons yearn for the right end of a rifle, and, to tell the truth, as I sat in that corner of the railway waiting-room from where I could see in the distant gloom spurts of fire leap out in quick succession, I felt the hillman's instinct grip me, and before long would have found myself asking someone whether it was a private fight or whether I might join in. But instead I thought of Afghanistan, that

birthplace of warriors and statesmen, where an effort is being made to subordinate the physical by the philosophical, as behoves a country of great heritage and of greater future destiny. I thought also that the country of grandsires might frown down on me if I fought other peoples' battles.

Next morning I had the first whiff of savoury, roast meat, heard the clang of the brass workers' hammers, drank green tea at every wayside café, saw the quail fights, and jostled in the noisy throng which seemed to crowd the streets, and talk vehemently as if patching up old quarrels and hatching new ones. Amid this medley of virile humanity, of large white turbans, voluminous trousers and hennaed beards, I was in the real East. Then, sitting in an up-to-date motor-car, amid scenes of old Asia, I felt at home, for was I not on my way to the Capital of Afghanistan, of which little is written and less is known? That Kabul, the dream of my childhood days, that city of mingled hopes and fears.

The car swished past caravan-camels, slow horse-carriages and pack-ponies till the whitewashed mosques, minarets and spires faded from the eye, and the tortuous defiles of the Khyber Pass stirred my imagination. We negotiated hairpin bends at hair-raising speed, and I felt safe in the knowledge

that I was not a mark for any of my countrymen's bullets. On we sped past the string of block-houses crowning the hill-tops, which appeared to me to be guarding nothing in particular. Away in the hollow below, in the sun-baked valley, fierce-looking men ploughed their fields with rifles slung over their shoulders, and black clothed, veiled tribeswomen, with earthen water vessels on their heads, wended their weary way to the walled villages far off.

The road at last debouches on the Anglo-Afghan Frontier, and once beyond the outpost of Turkham Dekka is reached. Tears dimmed my eyes as I gazed at the low-roofed houses of Dekka, for was I not on the soil of the God-gifted Kingdom of the Amirs.

The plains of Jallabad were soon crossed, and as the call of the evening prayer was summoning the faithful to the mosques we pulled up at our abode in Kabul.

[There is one remarkable fact about this capital of Afghanistan that escapes the notice of many observers. They presume that this town of memories is wholly associated with the political controversies of the past; with the rivalries of Britain and Russia; with Lord Robert skirmishes; with blood feuds. The folk-lorist sees in it a host of evidence of culture-mixing; the archæologist delights in its associations

with lost cities of the earliest civilizations; but no one seems to notice that the future political and moral evolution of Central Asia is going to begin and end in Afghanistan.

The people of that country take their inspiration from the City of Kabul, and that which is of the utmost significance to note is the fact that the present form of Afghan mentality is a healthy admixture of Europe and Asia, a happy blending of the East and the West. This small buffer state has not only felt the Western impact, and is endeavouring to respond to it wholeheartedly, but is also finding itself often in some awkward predicament as regards the suitability of modern ideas in an essentially conservative, self-sufficient and proud people.

The King of Afghanistan is sometimes hard put to it to reconcile the newer order of things with the older prejudices, but since the awakening of a popular and enlightened public opinion in the country his task is easier now than it was a few years ago. The old and the new generations are certainly reconciled in their common love of a martial career. The Habibyah College, standing near the Foreign Office, is a noble building. In front of it one can see an old-fashioned Afghan riding a pony, with his black locks falling upon his shoulders, wearing a red and blue uniform,

and galloping his mount. The new Afghan soldier, with shaven chin, black astrakhan cap, decked in a greenish uniform, walks smartly; with him a would-be soldier cousin, wearing a brownish suit, trailing along on a bicycle. A third immaculately dressed youth, with an air of "too much freedom" prances past the building smoking a cigarette. Anon, he sees an elder emerge from The Wizaratay Kharija (Foreign Office); he throws away his cigarette; the elder, appreciating the delicacy of the situation, turns away till their paths cross, the younger man salutes, the elder impresses a kiss on the eyebrow of the younger, and a catastrophe to the age-long traditions of Afghanistan is averted. For none must smoke, or laugh audibly, before an elder.

A little farther along one is just facing the gate of the Foreign Office. This is the only office in Kabul where work is done behind closed doors. Looking up one notices that a red flag is hoisted, and one is immediately given the reason. The King has been visiting the office. The offices inside are built round a garden, and there is a mosque in one of its corners. Then one walks on towards the Kabul river. On the bank of it there is always a great crowd of people of all denominations; rustics of the villages are buying green tea, sugar, and other articles from the booth

shops; in the tea-shops large customers are being catered for; cup after cup is being quaffed; chunks of bread are being washed down by large gulps of tea; Afghan pipes are making audible noises, and talk flows merrily.

But here one leaves the Deh Afghabi, or old Kabul, and, crossing the bridge, enters into the new city.

Along the bank of the river runs the wall of a large orchard, and a double-storied house stands circled by it. The red flag with the crest of the hammer and the sickle is hoisted on the building, and the sight of the peeping "comrades" of Moscow leaves one in no doubt as to the origin of that Embassy. Only a hundred yards from it stands the great workshop of Kabul, built in a European fashion. The machinery is worked by electricity, the power being brought from Jabulus Siraj, about ten miles from the factory. Everything from howitzers to boots and shoes is turned out from this workshop, and it is entirely controlled by the Afghan Government.

Then there are the German, French, British, Italian and Turkish Consulates and Embassies, and this side of diplomatic life is not a happy one.

YOUNG AFGHANS ON TREK

When Colonel Keen was demarcating the Anglo-Afghan Frontier in 1921 a Kabul Sirdar of considerable importance told me that a closer union between Afghanistan and Great Britain would paralyse the fear of war in Central Asia, and he also hoped that the new Indo-Afghan Frontier might be a link instead of a barrier. Later I heard a similar opinion expressed in London. But many competent observers of the Asian High Policy both in the East and the West aver that if that pious hope is to assume a reality it will be necessary for both countries to know more of each other, and approach their common interests with greater sympathy.

The consideration of these facts was never so necessary as it is to-day, for a rapid shifting of scenes in Asia may well imperil the peace of the world if European nations, and especially England, continue to stand aloof, watching and wondering over the plethora of events which has stirred up the very soul of the changing East. Furthermore, Great Britain's break with Russia has opened another avenue of thought to those who, believing in the evil influences of Bolshevik propaganda in Asia, fear its intensification in the Middle East on its march towards India. And in the midst of it all stands Afghanistan,

recognized by England, it is true, as an independent kingdom, yet merely tolerated as a distant "friend." Almost the same sentiments prevail in Afghanistan.

But to me it seems little short of a political tragedy of our times that two neighbours should remain so remote, when the advancing needs of the world demand a closer connection and a more intimate approach between the people of this country and those of my own; especially at a time when the political drama of the rising, revolting East will be enacted in and around the Kingdom of Kabul.

When I think of H.M. Amir Amanullah of Afghanistan I cannot but recall a date which stands out prominently in the recent history of my country. One fine morning, not so many years ago, the Amir's bodyguard was drawn up in front of the Palace in Kabul. Young officers galloped their horses through the lines shouting Turkish commands to their men; motor-cars were clamouring at the gate, as a few privileged elders of the city by the garden railing watched the parade. Anon a silence pervaded the scene. "Alla Hazrat, Amir Sahib!" shouted the Chamberlain. The respectful silence was immediate and impressive; one could hear one's heart beat as the stout, well-dressed, middle-aged monarch Habibullah of the God-gifted Kingdom of Kabul

stepped out from the main door of his palace. He walked slowly between the rows of soldiers. A number of Sirdars, high officials and Court hangers-on followed, and watched him enter the car which was to take him to Lughman, where he was bound for a little rest and some Shikar. That parade, that gorgeous spectacle, is as vivid in my mind as the last phase of him. As we all know, he never returned to his capital, but rests for ever at Lughman. Does it not show what lay behind the scenes?

When the news of H.M. Habibullah Khan's death reached Kabul the whole city was plunged into deep mourning, for, despite his many drawbacks, the late King was loved by an influential section of the nobles. Indeed, towards the latter part of his reign, the late Amir more truly represented the vested interests of the nobility of his country than of the Afghan nation. Nor did his visit to India stand him in good stead, for ever since his return from Hindustan both his power and prestige were on the downward course, till an assassin's bullet sent him to his eternal rest.

Mourning though there was, it remained only superficial with those who mattered in Kabul, and busybodies were bestirred. Was Afghanistan to be precipitated into one of those internecine wars, which visit that country at the close of an Afghan monarch's

life? There was great fear of it. But, paradoxical as it may appear, on this one occasion Afghan history did not repeat itself, for H.M. Amanullah jumped into the arena, realizing that while the country was still reeling under the impact of the blow he must act instantly, decidedly and firmly. As events showed, that quick decision which he put into practical form, saved an internecine struggle, and secured for him the throne into the bargain. The triumph of Ghazi Amanullah is not entirely due to the Anglo-Afghan war of 1919, which many Jingo Imperialists believe to be the case, for he had won the hearts of his people long before that affair, even before his father's death. He was always a hero to the man in the street, for he had realized that public opinion among the Afghans was crystallizing.

On ascending the throne of a new Afghanistan he continued to bestow attention on popular aspirations, and, perceiving that the people were fretting under the yoke of the nobles, he yielded to the rising tide of Afghan public opinion. He emphasized the view—which disgusted the nobility—that he was the representative of the masses, a king risen out of the humble ranks of his kinsmen. Again, he owes his further popularity to the fact that, being only a third son of his father, he had the good fortune not to be

born as heir to the throne, and he thus escaped the hot-house upbringing of would-be Amirs of Afghanistan. His appreciation of the rights of the people coupled with his unaffected and plain manners account for his success. He goes about disguised at nights in the streets of Kabul to examine the conditions of life of the poorer people. He is the idol of the army, and since he has given orders that the general meeting of the tribesmen of the eastern districts of his country shall take place every year, where all matters appertaining to the moral and material interests of the clansmen are to be discussed, he has now been looked upon as a champion of a representative form of government. He is devoting a great deal of thought to matters educational.

Yet Amir Amanullah has not been alone in transforming old Afghan scenes, for two very significant personalities have loomed large in respect to the new Afghanistan. One of them, Sirdar Mahmood Baig Turzi, immediately after the proclamation of Afghan independence, was entrusted with the work of the Foreign Office at Kabul. And could one have imagined that an Afghan noble living in exile in the Levant and married to a Syrian lady, was one day destined to be both the Foreign Minister at Kabul and the father-in-law of the King of the Afghans?

In his leisure hours this veteran politician of Afghanistan still keeps up his pursuit of writing fiction in his inimitable Persian style.

The other figure of considerable importance is General Nadir Khan, once the Commander-in-Chief of the Afghan forces, and till recently Afghan Minister in Paris. Like Mahmood Baig Turzi, he was also an exile in India, at Dehra Dun, till his father was permitted to return to Kabul. General Nadir Khan has the rare distinction of being both a diplomat and a man of the sword. During his term of office at the head of the army people stigmatized him as cruel to the core, but he was cruel because he was engaged in a cruel game. The analogy in this respect between his reputation and that of the late Amir Abdur Rahman is close, for when the Amir was asked whether he did not consider he ruled with an iron hand—"Yes, I do so," he is said to have replied, "because I rule an iron people." Nadir Khan's case is similar, for one cannot afford to have a kind heart when one goes out to kill or be killed. No three men in Afghanistan have so filled the drama of action of their country within living memory as have H.M. the Amir, Tarzai and Nadir Khan. They will have an enduring place in the Middle-Eastern history of our times.

The Government of the country can at best

be called a benevolent autocracy. The chief authority is vested in the Amir, or H.M. King Amanullah Khan, who is the third son of his father. This young monarch is one of those remarkable personalities which arise once in a while in a nation, and for a man of thirty-four years of age, in whose life so many events have crowded within the last seven years, he is little short of a genius. To rule over Afghanistan is a difficult matter at any time, but when one notices that he sits on the throne under such pressure of political events and still finds his throne fairly secure, one feels that such rule deserves more than an ordinary comment and appreciation.

The young King's one and great desire is to see his nation amongst the foremost peoples of the modern world. To that end he has inaugurated a system of education efficient in the extreme. No less than eight hundred schools have already sprung up all over the country within the last two years. A number of boys are sent for education to different parts of Europe, whilst others are being educated by the French and the German tutors at Kabul.

In matters of diplomatic representation Afghanistan is now represented in most countries in the West, nor is the army being neglected; and in his public speeches this remarkable ruler of modern

Afghanistan never fails to allude to a saying of his grandfather. The army must be the first and last care of the Kings of Kabul, "lest an Afghan forgets the touch of the handle of the sword."

In matters of military training the Afghans have always been very keen; their geographical position demands it, and this idea is hardened into a passion at Kabul to-day. Conforming to the changing scenes of its neighbours the Afghan Government has devoted a great deal of attention to aviation. But this side of military preparedness is not devoid of some humour, because in certain parts of Afghanistan the good and simple folk of outlandish areas do not quite understand the aeroplane. In the back of beyond, amongst the village peasants, an aeroplane is regarded as a device of the devil, something invested with supernatural attributes.

This truth came to me during my journey, one particular night, and with startling fashion. I was then journeying in the far and wild hilly tracts, came to a village, and halted for the night at an inn. Being particularly tired I strolled in the fields, offered my prayers and got to bed fairly early. A hush came upon the scene soon after dusk because no caravan was staying there, and there were not more than twenty people in the inn.

In the dead of night I heard someone scratching at my door. The noise awakened me, so I poured some more crude oil into the lamp that gave light, and smoke, in my room, and moved about thinking that this might frighten away anyone with evil designs. I was not wrong, for the scratching stopped, and I got into bed again. But no sooner had I covered myself than my eyes fell upon the blade of a large knife which was thrust through a chink in the door. Not only was it thrust through but it also began to enlarge the chink, and soon cut what appeared to me to be a hole in the board. I was so dumbfounded that before I could realize what was happening a fairly large hole had been made. The blade was then sharply taken out, and, as I fumbled for my revolver, to my utter astonishment through the hole came an animal's paw, hairy but small. This paw felt for the chain with which I had fastened the door inside. The sight scared me, for, although I had been warned against thieves, I could not quite become reconciled to the idea that an animal could so intelligently cut a hole in the wooden panel and wield a large knife.

I was still trembling with excitement at the sight of this weird hand when I found my revolver, and, grasping it in sheer nervousness, fired twice in rapid

succession. But the hand was still busy, perhaps busier. So, thinking that I had missed the mark, I fired a third time, then a fourth and fifth shot followed as rapidly as I could press the trigger. The hand still scratched vigorously within an inch of the chain, so I flung the empty revolver savagely at the hand and hit it. But simultaneously I heard a hue and cry in the compound outside my room. "Catch the thief!" "The murderer!" they shouted. "Capture, shoot his monkey!" Torches were lighted, ponies broke their ropes, shots were fired, the yelling and shouting was nerve-wracking. With trembling hands I opened my door and was swallowed up in the general din and confusion. The thief had, however, got away, though replying to the fire as he ran.

When quiet was restored the proprietor of the inn, and other travellers, came to examine my room. "To cool you down" as they said. It was "that notorious thief," they informed me, "who has trained a monkey as his assistant." Nothing to be nervous about they thought; and, when I spoke of the weirdness of the tugging hand, despite my five revolver shots, they stroked their beards, and one actually ventured to state that I was perhaps not a crack shot. Then another, toying with my revolver, proposed a

closer examination of the bullet marks on the door. Our amazement was great to find that no bullets had hit the wood at all. Where had the bullets gone? A further search revealed the fact that all the bullets from my revolver cartridges had been removed, also those from my spare ammunition.

Then I remembered that I had left my weapon in its belt hanging on a mulberry tree under which I had washed myself, and I had forgotten to wear it when I had gone for my walk in the fields outside the village.

Further discourse was interrupted by the whirring noise of an approaching aeroplane. Everyone ran out into the courtyard, looked up in wonderment at the tiny light of the aircraft, and, muttering prayers and shouts of "Curses be on the devil," as they spat on the ground. When the 'plane had disappeared they stood in awe-stricken silence. "The devil is passed," they whispered. "The evil Spirit has flown away," and, with prayers on their lips everyone went to his respective rest.

An unheard degree of latitude has now been granted by the new Amir to public opinion, and a representative form of government best suited to Afghan conditions is granted. That does not weaken his position, for the present ruler of Kabul is now

more truly the representative of his people. He has escaped the hot-house upbringing of would-be monarchs, and having risen out of the humble ranks of his countrymen has learnt the art of ruling with safety and tact. But of his court and courtiers! How truly does the Persian problem run, "Fear not the King, but the guard at the gate."

The Kabuli is so kind that he might be called cruel, for his hospitality will ruin your digestion. As soon as you arrive at his house a goat will be killed, a feast prepared, dried and fresh fruit heaped on the table. You must consume all, and what you cannot you must take home with you. Then his neighbour, in turn, hears of your arrival, and you must be his guest. This cycle seems to be never-ending, till a day comes when you are faced with the fact that salvation alone lies in escaping from the capital into the heart of the country where no one knows you. There again you would be fattened and feasted if you did not deny that you were a holy man; for every stranger in the Afghan uplands is supposed to be either a rogue or a holy man. Sometimes the one does not substantially differ from the other.

I was in this predicament when I finally left the town for the country. Nor can I forget a certain

day in March when the Kabul river had overflowed its banks in the region of the Punjshair valley. Sun-stricken tracts came to life once more, and everywhere stretches of rich, green sprouts of wheat delighted the eye, till the mouth of the valley terminated in rocky tracts.

Sitting there on one of the green knolls I watched, away in the distance, the string of camels lumbering along, pensively carrying merchandise from Chinese-Turkestan to the Afghan markets. The disappearance and reappearance of those dromedaries, as they wound their way so silently through the gorges, I cannot forget: nor yet the distant, rhythmical tinkle of bells hanging from their hairy necks, the barking of the caravan dogs, and the shouting of swarthy Tajiks. The whole panorama so fascinated me that, within two hours, I, too, was in that caravan, bound for the city of Shakadara. That town owes its chief importance to the fact that it is one of the halting places of the caravans on their weary trail. There is only one serai—rest house—there, which is fully occupied on the arrival of a caravan. But pilgrims like myself have consideration shown to them wherever they go, so, weary as I was, the innkeeper gave me a shelter despite the overcrowded accommodation.

After some food, I betook myself to the bazaar, where a poetical contest was in progress. A large hall in a wealthy merchant's house was where the master-singers of the village were gathered together. At the door two huge beacon lights, aided by smoky torches, guided the way up to a carpeted floor. As I stepped in scholarly eyes were turned on me, so, folding my knees I sat in an obscure position.

Poem after poem was read amidst the vociferous admiration of the audience. But the time came, as was inevitable, when it was my turn to read my effort. But, as I am not "touched" by poetry I was lost for the moment. I could not stand the strain of so many pairs of learned and expectant eyes turned upon me. But recovering very soon from this scholarly attack, for something within helped me, I rose to the occasion, and, to my amazement, found myself reciting. I narrated loudly and long, I know not what, but the attempt must have been frail for the words "he is but a pilgrim" reached me.

This meeting ended shortly after midnight, when, returning to my abode, I retired to bed. But with the braying of donkeys, the bubbling of the dromedaries, frequent barking of street dogs and the snoring of Tajiks, I remained very much awake, so acting



RED KAFFIRS OF KAFIRISTAN, AN UNKNOWN COUNTRY.

as an involuntary guard against all luggage-lifters with whom such Asian cities abound. Added to all this a home-sick Kabuli insisted upon playing the pensive melody on his flute of that beautiful Kabul song, "Wai! Baghay Gull," "Wai! Baghay Gull" (O! My Garden of Flowers), meaning thereby Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan.

Early in the morning I made my way to the mosque, and hardly was the prayer over when I heard the booming of guns. For the moment no one could understand the reason for it; some thought that brigands had come down from the "independent" uplands. But we were not long left in doubt. Farmers ran about in wild confusion, for this time it was no invasion of freebooters but of locusts. The guns were intended to divert this cloud of destruction from the district. It was, however, otherwise ordained. Millions and millions of locusts had covered a space of ten miles outside the city, they had then come over the town, flying hither and thither, buzzing, whirring and causing a sound as if heavy showers of rain and hail were falling. The green fields on which they settled had become a glittering yellow. All the mulberry trees, vegetables, grass, everything green, had 'disappeared' as if by magic. The wheatfields consisted only of

stalks of straw. The insects penetrated into houses, mosques, kitchens, stables and blinded the people in the street with the density of their number. For a little over half-an-hour the locusts remained in Shakadara, and left the "Green City," as the town is known in Afghanistan, unsightly and changed to brown. Then they flew off. But the stench remaining was so powerful that till midday, I could not get it out of my nostrils.

We then journeyed on towards the north where the Punjshair valley becomes narrower and more awe-inspiring, and here I and Rask, a Norwegian, intended to call a halt for leisure to finish a book.

In the wayside villages I met again that abundant hospitality that characterizes hill-men all over the world; so I stayed with a farmer, and had another glimpse of family life in an Afghan village.

CHAPTER IV

AFGHAN WOMEN

THE women of Afghanistan have a race distinction in the matter of henpecking their husbands not only quickly but effectively. Some folk have even hazarded the opinion that they manipulate the affair by witchcraft, but I have found that facts do not substantiate the contention.

There is certainly one case very vividly impressed in my mind where something of domestic necromancy may have been resorted to. I was the whole day shooting with a farmer in his fields, and in the heat of the chase we went farther than we intended. When rain began to fall we hurried homewards, and then discovered that the combined rations we carried consisted of some dried biscuits. Uncontrollable hunger accentuated fatigue, but the farmer, being a very orthodox Mohammedan, could not eat the English made biscuits lest they contained the fat of swine, and said, "what you have not seen made you can't trust."

The wind and rain swept the fields, and tempers

as well as our path were frequently lost and regained, till we espied the dim lights of the village twinkling through the woods. It was his wife, thought the farmer, who was entirely to blame for all this "hardship." He would say something to her this time which he had not said since he was lost in the blizzard a year ago. And when Abdullah, the farmer, took snuff after snuff, I knew he was thoroughly upset.

At last we arrived at the house. There was then one great growl and then a hush. Not another sound till lifting the curtain I saw Abdullah devouring the roasted meat. He had already finished a big portion of a plate full of rice, and was too busy to notice me. "This is an admirable woman, this wife of mine," he said, "look!" He pointed to the residue of the feast. "All this cooking for us." Next day he bought her a ruby ring of Badakhshan fame.

But it is not in the manner of attending to the physical comforts of their menfolk that the Afghan women excel, for the warlike Afghans are just as fond as any men in Europe of seeing well-dressed women, and women who are capable of a "make up." This tendency of the mind has engendered amongst the Afghan women a degree of love for self-beauti-

fication which is not generally known. Many kinds of pomades, cosmetics, powders, and even lip salve, are therefore used. A paste, for instance, prepared of ground almonds, with the white of eggs and jasmine oil, is used to refresh the complexion.

Kohal is lavishly applied to the eyes, and powder is imported all the way from Kashghar for the poor and the rich alike at Kabul. It is first of all rubbed over the face and allowed to stay on for an hour, then the face is washed, not with soap but with a sort of oatmeal flour, and another coating of powder is used. This method is supposed to produce a very delicate flesh tint, and over it just a suspicion of red is dabbed on the cheeks. Paste freshly prepared from henna leaves is smeared over the nails which reddens them, but none bother about the lifting of cheeks, double chins, or of dieting for slimness any more than of fine ankles or good insteps.

Generally speaking, women observe Purdah, that is to say they do not appear unveiled before strangers, but their lives are none the less pleasant because their women friends visit them almost every day, and in their own large gardens open air feasts are arranged. Afghan women are also very fond of paying calls, and there are no fixed times for callers, although, quite contrary to the Western method, it

is appreciated if a friend just drops in at the meal hour. It brightens the food they say. The life of the women is full of petty superstitions. Thursday nights are regarded with special dread, for it is believed that "evil ones" fly from the East towards the West. An unmarried woman must on no account wear a green scarf, otherwise the fairies would cast their shadow upon her and deprive her of her senses. Under a starry sky, too, no white pudding must be eaten, for it is sure to attract the evil eye.

The marriageable age is about eighteen to twenty for the girl and twenty-five for the boy, and all matrimonial alliances are arranged by the parents. Hardly ever would one meet a man who has more than one wife, and divorce is not a private matter but a public affair, and every effort is made to bring pressure to bear upon the wife and the husband to continue the married life and not resort to separation. A divorced man or woman is always regarded more or less as a social outcast.

Education amongst the women is increasing very rapidly, and even now she, in every case, acts as the family cashier. Very often also matters of great importance are decided on the sole advice of women, and their voice counts for a great deal more than is generally supposed. In battle the women fight

shoulder to shoulder with men, and there is not a single Afghan woman who might not be regarded as a member of a "reserve unit" in case of war. Many Afghan women beat their menfolk at tent-pegging and horse-racing during the annual feasts of the Idd which marks the end of the month of fasting.

Ultimately I reached a little house in a remote spot, and there set about writing some portion of my book, before we started once more upon our pilgrimages through a portion of Central Asia and Persia.

CHAPTER V

THE MAGIC HOUSE IN AN AFGHAN GLEN

It was one evening whilst busily writing in this village that, for the twentieth time, I flung down my pen, mopped my forehead and remarked to Rask that the room was growing unbearably warm. Outside it was a raw end of September night—the upland of Punjshair in Afghanistan can be cold—but, although we had not yet ventured upon the lighting of fires, the atmosphere of the room in which I was writing was as sultry as that of an afternoon in July.

Rask sat at work near the window, and was, therefore, less likely to suffer from the high temperature, but I had doffed my jacket nearly an hour before, and now sat in my shirtsleeves with crumpled hair, collarless and tieless, as might a busy man in midsummer.

“Rask,” I said to my colleague, “we must really get at the meaning of this intolerable stuffiness. Why, there is a frowst in this room that would frighten an inspector of factories in England, yet it’s as chilly outside as ever I knew it to be at this time

of year. What does it mean, in the name of Allah? If this wasn't a one-storied house I'd be certain that this room was above the kitchen, and that the cook was capable of beating any boilerman at his own job."

Rask grunted and went on with his work. He was a phlegmatic Norwegian friend and together we had come to rusticate for a while in what we had been told was the quietest part of Afghanistan; partly to rest our travel-tired bones, partly to complete a book.

The rather large and rambling cottage we had selected, built after the Paghman houses in English fashion, was an unpretentious enough dwelling. A one-storied, sprawling stone house, almost of the bungalow type. Such a house, indeed, as one finds by the hundred in any of the eastern countries. We had no lack of space, and the room we had selected for writing was a pleasant place enough, looking out upon a wide stretch of terraced cultivation, till lost amongst the high walls of the mountains some seven miles away.

The cottage had, however, one peculiarity, which I must admit decidedly jarred upon me, although it did not seem to affect my immovable companion in the slightest degree. Its walls, which seemed to be

composed of a hard and uncommon kind of cement, were painted in the colours and similitude of fire, so that they had the effect of a mass of leaping, yellow-topped flames, so painfully realistic in appearance that, at night, and in the vagaries of lamp-light, one was hard put to it not to believe that it danced and writhed with the sinuous movement of real fire. To heighten the illusion the roof had been painted to resemble whirling smoke-clouds. The walls were pictureless, and it was obvious that any attempt to decorate them in this manner would have resulted in an effect of the most hopeless incongruity.

I am one of those people upon whom the bizarre leaves more than a passing impression, and the fantastic background which daily confronted me began to exert an influence the reverse of what I had hoped for in this quiet place. As the days went by I grew so peevish and irritable that to anyone less immovable than Rask I should have proved an almost insupportable companion. We had taken the place for three months only, but had a longer tenancy been necessary I would certainly have insisted upon the papering and painting of our writing-room. However, as the first month of our tenancy drew to a close, I found myself gradually becoming more acclimatized to the mimic conflagration which

enviored me, although I continued to murmur against the questionable taste and Dantesques imagination which had conceived a decorative scheme so utterly opposed to all cultured notions of a domestic interior.

As I laid down my pen, and rose to open the door, Rask wheeled in his chair and confronted me with a grim smile of amusement. "I fear, my friend, that your surroundings are beginning to influence you unduly," he said. "You are becoming neurotic, or, as I have had occasion to notice lately, you appear to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown. In a word, this rather unusual colour-scheme has got on your nerves."

"Nonsense," I said, annoyed that my weakness should have become so evident. "I certainly don't like the general effect, but as to its having the least reflection upon my nerves, you're quite mistaken."

"I think not," he said 'dryly. "I'm positive, indeed, that your complaints regarding the temperature of this room are due to nothing else than the effect of its colour-scheme on your imagination. You're a sensitive man, Shah. I have seen several cases of the kind in Christiansand. You must check this brain-sickness; you must fight it. It is all pure fancy, believe me. You must continue to work in

this room and you must say to yourself, ' This heat is reflected from the painted walls upon my mind. It is not real, only imaginary.' ”

“ Fiddlesticks,” I retorted.

“ Yet I feel no intense heat,” he said with his everlasting smile, “ how do you account for that? ”

“ By the fact that by nature you're ticketed among the cold-blooded animals,” I retorted with that sturdy Afghan impatience which rejects personal analysis as an alien absurdity. “ I believe you could sit in a cook-house wrapped in a Yakut bearskin.”

Rask laughed good-naturedly, and saying that he was tired, and would go to bed, left the room. I continued at my desk, as I was behind with my part of the work, and in view of the impatience of the publishers it behoved me to hasten. So I toiled away, unconscious of time or surroundings.

For at least a couple of hours I continued to transcribe from my diary, too much occupied to feel any real inconvenience from the temperature of which I had complained. At length, however, it became painfully apparent to me that if the heat of the room had been uncomfortable, and even stifling, before, it had now reached the bounds of human endurance.

Gazing around, seeking some solution of the inexplicable condition I started from my seat with a cry of amazement, for the wall directly in front of me seemed to be aglow with a smouldering fire. The counterfeit flames with which it was covered appeared to be writhing in the first slow movement of gathering conflagration. I looked at the lamp. It certainly jumped and flickered as most lamps do when their oil supply is nearly at an end, but by no means in a manner to create such an illusion as I had just witnessed. Glancing back at the walls I saw that their flame-pattern had become once more quiescent.

I then swore with all the irritable feebleness of the unstrung—that kind of profanity which in man takes the place of an hysterical outburst in women, and, turning out the lamp with shaking fingers, hurried from the room. Was it a trick of the eyesight, bred of recent illusion and sudden gloom, or did I really see a dull, red glow, as out of the heart of smouldering ashes, glimmer from the wall?

I spent an uncomfortable and almost sleepless night, and, next morning, after breakfast, I announced my intention of 'dropping work for the day, and taking a rather prolonged tramp, on the

plea that I felt shaken and upset by the occurrence of the night. Rask heartily backed my resolution, so, donning my ulster, I struck westwards, my objective being a mosque to which the local guide laid the somewhat extravagant claim of Abbaside origin.

The air was clear and crisp, and held the chill promise of October, from the advent of which, indeed, we were only a day removed; and as I tramped between bronzing hedgerows, and noticed how the ripeness of autumn had mellowed the quaint Afghan country, I felt how good was the outside of even the cosiest cottage for a man whose tastes had never run to the confinement of rooms. I covered the three miles to the little, old mosque like a lad in training, and, passing through the garden gate, walked up the overgrown drive and cast about for a means of entrance to the low-domed, time-honoured building, which seemed to hold promise of a rare, inner beauty.

As I prospected the mullah, a soldierly, middle-aged figure, with little resemblance to the ancient whom one usually associates with such an office, made his appearance, and under his guidance I was well rewarded for my walk by the sight of the wonderful, arched building that would have aroused envy in the

hearts of many keepers of lesser places. He proved quite as inquisitive, however, as if he had boasted the eighty years odd of the average mullah, and had soon wormed sufficiently into my confidence to learn from whence I came, and where I was staying in the neighbourhood. "A comfortable house, sir, The Jumma," he said, "though it wasn't built yesterday. Are you staying for long, sir?"

"For three months only," I replied.

"Yes, it's usually a short let," he chattered on. "It's a summer-house, so to speak, I never remember seeing it occupied in the autumn months, so far back as I can recollect."

"You say it is old," I remarked, "how old would it be?"

"Oh, not so old as houses go," he replied, "a hundred years maybe. They say that one of the Kafir Princes built it for his house. And he brought a woman. She was a foreign lady, an Indian, if I remember rightly, and the story goes that Ramat Khan, who was a John Company man before he became a Moslim, went to India and brought the woman with him, but could not put up with her heathen ways, so built The Jumma and housed her there. For the clergy would always frown down upon them."

"Perhaps she was responsible for the painted room," I said, more to myself than to my informant, "you've heard of that, I suppose?"

"Oh, there's talk of that too. Fool's talk," he laughed. "Some of the folk about here believe that the window of that room glows red at times, as if the inside were on fire. That's what she's capable of, sir. It is wonderful. They even fix the time of the year in which it is supposed to blaze, if I'm not wearying you."

"What time of the year?" I asked, being now very interested.

"Oh, some time near about now, but I take little heed of such talk. Moslims do not believe in superstitions."

When I returned at the lunch time I entered abruptly and found Rask pouring over a sheet of paper covered with letters in some unknown Eastern script. So occupied was he that he did not notice my presence until I spoke to him, when he started almost guiltily.

"Ah, Shah," he cried, "back already! I am just hammering away at this inscription. Can't quite make it out."

"What inscription?" I asked.

"The inscription over the door," he replied,

looking rather foolish. "Haven't you noticed it before?"

"I certainly noticed something of the sort," I admitted, "but I always thought that it was a part of the decorative scheme of the room. What does it say in any case?"

"I really can't say," he muttered confusedly, "it is in a very ancient form of Sanskrit, but I cannot discover the precise purport of it, the meaning is so obscure."

"In Sanskrit, you say. Why it must be the work of the lady who stayed in this house." And I told him what the mullah had said. As I did so I noticed his face grow grave.

"My friend, let me have that translation," I begged. "Sanskrit, old or new, never bothered you very long. You are keeping something back, Rask, out with it, like a good fellow. I'm simply consumed with curiosity."

His face grew even more determined.

"No, Shah," he said, in his deep, slow voice, "no, my dear friend, it is not good that you should know this thing. You must keep your mind at rest, and ask me nothing more about it."

"Rubbish!" I rapped out. "Don't be mysterious. You know how I dislike it."

"No," he said decidedly, "I am not going to tell you. Why, you're as pale as death, man. You're shaking all over. You should have had a real rest before commencing work down here. You have really never got over the hardships of our journey. You're worn out, and on the verge of a serious breakdown, if you have not already contracted one. We must leave this place at once as it does not suit you."

"Rask," I said angrily, "you must tell me what you mean. There is something queer. You are keeping some matter of vital importance from me. I insist upon knowing what it is."

We were still arguing over this when my servant came in and told me that an outrider had arrived post haste from Kabul, where my presence on business of urgency was requested.

"Capital!" exclaimed Rask, "it is a godsend. Get into the saddle, and stay a night or two in Kabul. Go with a shooting party. Better still, don't come back at all, and I will join you in a couple of days, and we will write in the mulberry avenue there."

"I can't give up a three months' tenancy for a whim," I replied. "I will return to-morrow evening."

"No, Shah, not to-morrow evening," said Rask

impressively. "I have a good reason for speaking as I do."

"Well, the next evening then," I said, and went to my room to pack my kit-bag.

When I came back to the writing-room I was surprised to see Rask removing the furniture from the room. Desks and chairs littered the hall, and a great pail of what looked like whitewash stood in a corner from which the carpet had been removed.

"What on earth are you up to now?" I asked, "you speak of leaving the place, and I find you making preparations for a sort of pre-Christmas clean-up."

"Please ask no questions," he replied in his quaint manner, "something has got to be done here, Shah, something that should have been done long ago. That is all."

"Well, I haven't time to argue about it," I said, looking at my watch, "but I don't think that you are treating me fairly, that is all."

"You must trust me, my friend. Am I not worthy of your trust?"

"Oh, that's all right," I said, in a shamefaced way, and pressing his hand with perhaps more perfunctoriness than usual I hurried away.

Under the starlit sky when, during my gallop, I

let my mount slow down to an easy pace, I had enough leisure to ponder upon Rask's extraordinary preparations. That they were undertaken in view of what I had told him, and of what he had gleaned from the inscription, which he had declined to translate to me, I was positive.

His insistence that I should not return on the following night had the precise effect of making me resolved to do so, whatever the consequences. Then I remembered his predisposition to the mysterious; that natural affinity with all that was mystical and fantastic which had lured him from the wards of the psychological hospital in his native Christiansand, and had made him a wanderer in the dark places of the East. That he had discovered some mystical mare's nest in connection with that uncanny room I felt certain. But I promised myself that I would not miss the climax of his esoteric efforts, whatever they might be, and would return in good time to surprise him in the midst of his mysteries.

My business in Kabul was soon transacted, and I spent the time chiefly in visiting friends and relations. The next day also I idled away, and a little before the afternoon prayer saddled my horse and made my way back and up to my hill cottage.

It would be dusk when the half-way-house village could be reached where the Khan would insist upon my staying the night. In Afghanistan one dares not refuse when hospitality is extended, and hospitality is always extended, but the thought of solving the mystery of The Jumma preyed on my mind. I resolved, therefore, to break the hoary tradition for once, so, leaving my horse at my host's house, and under cover of darkness I walked up the narrow hill-pathway. Slowly I stumbled along, up and down, round and up, till I was only a mile from the little cluster of trees where our cottage nestled.

I now became conscious of an odd feeling of restlessness, to which I had been a stranger during my short stay in Kabul. Try as I might I could not shake off a sense of foreboding for which it was impossible to account.

October was now upon us, and the evening seemed to hold a deeper quantity of darkness than it had done of late. I now walked quicker, breasting the last, slight rise that I knew would bring me in sight of the cottage; and when, at last, the long incline was passed I peered through the fast gathering shadows in the direction of The Jumma, urged by the curious apprehension that was upon me.

So dark had it grown that for a moment or two I

failed to discern the house, although it could not have been more than a mile away; but at length I espied its dim, straggling shape lying beyond the tall old trees that partially screened it from the East, and at once I noticed that the window of our room was brightly lit. Perhaps Rask had guessed at my return, and had, perhaps, left the windows open to guide me on my way.

As I drew nearer I was at first astonished, then alarmed, to notice that what I had taken for a brilliant illumination now seemed to be like the glow of a furnace. Gripping my revolver firmly I broke into a run, and with every step I made the blaze seemed to grow more intense. When at last I came within some four hundred yards of the cottage I could see through the unshuttered windows the furious glare of the great conflagration. The interior of the room resembled a seething cauldron of flame, and a roaring sound borne on the still night air completed the assurance that what I beheld was fire of no ordinary kind but a veritable maelström of flaming destruction. I rushed up the little drive and dashed into the hall, the riot and the tempest of consuming flame surging in my ears like the noise of a high wind.

"Rask," I shouted, "Rask, where are you?"

There was no answer to my call, but from behind the door of the painted room came the tumult of a great burning. I beat upon it with both hands, calling upon my friend. That he was inside some instinct assured me. In an agony of terror I tore at the handle and wrenched the door open.

As I did so the surging roar ceased with startling suddenness. I dashed into the room. There lay Rask, or what at first seemed a charred heap in his likeness. I carried him to his bedroom, and tore his smouldering clothes from his scorched body. Again and again I called on the servant, but afterwards I learnt that my friend, full of what he had set out to do, and anxious to be left alone to accomplish his purpose, had given him permission to stay with friends for the night. With infinite difficulty I succeeded in getting him to bed, and then ran for a local, Eastern "medicine man" half a mile away, who returned with me and gave it as his opinion that Rask's injuries were serious, and his chances of recovery but slender.

During the next few days I nursed him sedulously, and during that time had a full opportunity of examining the painted room. It bore not the slightest trace of burning, but I noticed that the walls had been drenched with lime, and that the

painted flames which had covered them were now only partly visible.

Weary weeks passed ere Rask recovered sufficiently to be able to tell what had happened on that dreadful night. When at last he was able to speak without the fear of relapse I listened to one of the strangest stories it has been my lot to hear. He admitted that the meaning of the partly worn inscription, which he had found over the doorway, had been clear to him from the first. But I will let him tell his own story, just as he told it to me, propped up in bed, his hands and head still swathed in bandages.

“At first I was sceptical regarding the genuineness of the inscription,” he said with a wry smile, “but when you told me what you had heard from the mullah about the occupation of this cottage by an Indian lady, and the local legend, I could not help feeling the extraordinary heat from which you suffered in that terrible room, and which I myself experienced in a lesser degree, was not a thing of imagination. I became still more suspicious after you told me that you saw the walls glowing on the night before you went to Kabul, and resolved to make an attempt to probe the matter. The translated inscription runs as follows: ‘Nalla the pious, the servant of Durga, makes this gift of painted walls to the goddess, so that it may blaze annually

on the day of her festival, and may consume any who dares to defile the sanctity of her shrine.'

"The goddess Durga is a form of the terrible Kali, a deity worshipped extensively among the Hindus. Kali is the 'Black One,' the wife of Siva, whose impure worship is accompanied by picturesque but sanguinary rites. She is the special deity of the Thug caste, who perform constant sacrifices to her.

"At once it became clear to me that the Hindu lady in question must have been one of her devotees, and had probably been repudiated by her husband because of her irregularities which such a religious connection would undoubtedly render of constant occurrence. Desirous of propitiating the goddess in the manner peculiar to her caste, that is, by lighting a great fire in her honour once a year, and consuming within it human beings or animals, and unable to accomplish her pagan intentions in this country, she adopted magical means of doing so."

"Magical means?" I said. "I don't follow you."

"I am not surprised, Shah," he replied with the same wry smile, "but you must bear with me. As you know, in many countries, and especially in ancient Egypt and India, that which is painted is believed to possess a latent quality of reality, which only requires the urgency of a spell, or incantation, to render it actively existent. Nalla piously prays that the painted walls may flash in flames at a stated

period each year; that is, on the anniversary of the fire-festival of the goddess she adored. I took the trouble to ascertain the precise date of this festival, and found it commences in the last days of September, and continues during the first two or three days into October. As you absolutely refused to leave the house I feared a disaster and, therefore, conceived it a duty to try and render the spell harmless. I recollected that one of the most favoured of the ancient methods of cleansing a heathen shrine, and ridding it of malign influences, is by the application of quicklime to its walls, and directly I had you out of the way I proceeded to wash the painted walls with a mixture of lime which had been used to treat the soil in this garden. I noticed that as the duration of the fire-festival period advanced the manifestations of heat became more and more apparent, and, on the first evening of your absence, the temperature of the room grew so unbearable that I was forced to abandon my work.

“All the next morning I applied myself to the task, but the walls became so intensely hot that no sooner did I place the brush upon them than the lime dried up and fell off in flakes. It must have been about a quarter of an hour before you came that I found the temperature growing so intolerable as to

make a further stay in the room impossible. I remember staggering to the door, but as I reached it a spurt of flame flashed from the wall opposite me and barred my passage. A volume of noxious gas seemed to envelope me, and I immediately lost consciousness. Why I should have been burnt and the fabric of the room left undamaged is, I think, explained by the magical character of the fire; and we must remember that as I had defiled the shrine of the goddess the malign influence by which the room was permeated was probably determined to destroy me."

"But all this does not explain why the fire ceased so suddenly when I entered the room," I said. "I don't understand. . . ."

"That does not perplex me much," replied Rask. "All students of the occult know that a manifestation which may persist in the presence of one person usually ceases if another enters the scope of its activity. For instance, you did not witness the glow shine from the walls that night until I had left the room. Probably the reason that the phenomenon did not become visible before it did was that we were almost constantly together in the room."

CHAPTER VI

IN RED TURKESTAN

AFTER that startling experience, and Rask's recovery, we had no wish to stay any longer in that locality so travelled to Kushk on the western borders of Afghanistan. This is a Russian military post, situated near the Afghan frontier, and from this point a railway runs to Merv. At Kushk I encountered a number of Bolshevist officers, who seemed closely in touch with Russia by telegraph and wireless. At Herat, as I passed through, I had furnished myself with a new supply of rugs and carpets, and I did a fair business at Kushk.

When, therefore, I took the Murghab Railway to Merv I was once more dressed as a mullah; for I knew that in such a character I should be well received among the Turkomans.

Although the distance is only about two hundred miles, the train occupied nearly a day and a half to do the distance. We also had a most disconcerting experience at a place called Panjdeh, which is really

an oasis in the desert stretching between Kushk and Merv.

From Merv my Norwegian friend went to Krasnovodsk, and, I hope, reached home safely. But I had to get another man as my companion, and this I managed to do.

I do not know whether the Bolshevik authorities had telegraphed from Kushk, asking their colleagues at Panjdeh to examine us, but, at any rate, when the train stopped at that station for an hour, as Russian trains have a way of doing, we were told bluntly to come and explain ourselves to the officer on duty. This personage, who was seated in a large, roomy cabin near the railway, took no notice of us when we entered. Then, suddenly, he raised his head and gruffly ordered us to show our passports. I informed him that we had already had them examined at Kushk, where the authorities had given us to understand that they were perfectly satisfied, but, since I did not wish to make trouble, I produced the papers, and he looked at them closely.

"You are dressed as a mullah," he said at length, "but here you are described as a merchant. What is the meaning of this?"

"That is easily explained," I replied, "for I am both mullah and merchant."

"A strange combination," he sneered. "Priest and peddler, eh? What is your purpose in travelling in Russian Turkestan?"

"My purpose," I replied, "is to sell my wares and to preach the truth."

"And how," said he, looking at me sidelong, out of his small, watery, blue eyes, "how am I to know, most holy mullah, that you are not a spy or an enemy of the Russian Republic? Come, tell us that."

"I meddle not with such things at all," I assured him. "I am a man of peace, of religion."

"H'm!" he said. "I have met mullahs of your kind. Turkestan is full of them. Many of them have turned Bolshevik and are now preaching the doctrines of our President. Perhaps you desire to do the same."

It occurred to me like a flash that, by pretending to accede to his request, I could gain an unrivalled opportunity of examining the workings of the Bolshevik system in Turkestan, and also reach the Shrines of Bokhara. So, assuming a look of cunning, I replied, "I should have no objections to your proposal provided your government were as generous to me as I have heard it has been to some other mullahs."

He laughed. "I thought as much," he said. "Now look here, my very religious friend, I will give you a letter of introduction to someone in Merv who will be able to put you in touch with the proper authorities."

Then, calling in a military clerk, he dictated a brief note. This he handed to me along with my papers, remarking that we had better board the train at once since it was about to start.

Late in the afternoon of the next day the train steamed into Merv, that most malarial oasis, which, with its clusters of open shops and its dusty trees, uncovered drains and sweltering heat, is strangely reminiscent of India, but lacks the counterbalancing comforts of that land.

Since it was a Monday and so a market-day the streets were thronged with two-wheeled Persian carts, baggage-horses and an occasional motor-car filled with Russian officials. Here were fruits from Samarkand, silk, velvet and sweetmeats from Bokhara, carpets from Herat and samovars from Russia. Passing through the bazaar I made my way alone to the address the Russian official at Panjdeh had given me. It was that of a Russian commercial house. I found there the person to whom my note of introduction had been written, a man of typically Slavonic

appearance. After perusing the letter he put me through a rapid catechism with reference to my political beliefs. I took care to answer him in a satisfactory manner, and he seemed pleased with my replies.

"How would you like," he asked, "to go to Khiva?"

"What!" I cried. "To Khiva! Across the Desert of Kara-kum?"

"Just so," he said, still smiling. "You and your friends, I am told, sold your ponies at Kushk. Well, we will give you camels. Your business will be to travel from point to point and hold meetings among the Turkomans of the desert, describing the blessings of our rule, and assuring them that Bolshevism differs in no way from the Moslim faith, but is the modern interpretation of it. You understand me?"

I understood him perfectly. Of course I at once made up my mind that I would not do as he proposed, but would take care to tell the Turkomans that the "blessings" of Bolshevism had nothing in common with the faith of my fathers.

The next day my companions and I were fitted out from the government stores, received our credentials, and, mounting our camels, rode out

of the military quarter, and through the monotonous suburbs, into the desert beyond.

The heat was terrific, and even our animals seemed to feel it. This desert is not, however, a desolate expanse of sand, but is covered by small bushes and shrubs, and frequently rises into hillocks. The Russians say that the desert is gradually disappearing before the shrub known as saksaul, the long, penetrating roots of which dig their way deep down into the sand and bind it together into soil. Special nurseries have been established at many stations for the cultivation of this shrub, so that now there are no shifting sands. The dull shade of the saksaul gives the landscape an extraordinary appearance, not unlike that of a heathery moor in the distance.

We made fair progress and passed many Kirghiz who were evidently making for Merv. These people are normally Mahommedans but still retain traces of their old shamanistic religion. Of all Asiatic peoples they are, I should say, the greediest for news and politically the most argumentative. They plied me with questions regarding the tenets of Bolshevism, and I replied as tactfully as I could, for I was not yet far enough from Merv to carry out, with anything like safety, the plan I had formulated. At

night we stopped at a small oasis where there was a camp of Kirghiz.

We were the guests of the headman, who received us hospitably. We had a good supper of Pilau, and tea which the Kirghiz carry about with them in small blocks, and use as money. A tribal singer sang, in a whining, monotonous voice, a long ballad about a giant called Manas, whose adventures are scarcely fit for polite ears.

The headman questioned me closely regarding my business in Kara-kum, throwing covetous glances the while at the bundles of rugs I had brought with me. I presented him with one of them and he immediately asked for another, but, since I could spare no more, I courteously refused. At this he seemed much annoyed, and, turning to my companion, Shah Baz, asked him for a present. But he had absolutely nothing except the clothes he stood up in. When he explained this fact to the headman he was answered by a snort of contempt.

In about half an hour we lay down with our heads on our saddle-bags to snatch a few hours' rest. But feeling that we were not altogether safe I kept my revolver handy, and gradually I fell off to sleep.

When I woke it was broad daylight, and I was

rather surprised to find my head reclining on the sand. I sat up and looked around. There was my companion, but there was no sign of the Kirghiz nor of their camp. Worse still, there was neither hide nor hair of our camels, and every scrap of our baggage had been carried off.

I roused my companion, and my serving-man began loudly to lament his position, cursing the day he had left his home. Here we were in the middle of the Desert of Kara-kum. There was plenty of water at the oasis, but, since we had nothing to carry it in we could not move a step backward or forward.

Suddenly I realized precisely why the Bolsheviki had sent us into the desert. Convinced that we were spies, and apprehensive that, if they shot us, they might have to account to someone or other, they had beguiled us into these wastes to perish miserably of hunger.

Fool that I was, how easily I had been deceived! The Bolsheviki had played with me as a cat plays with a mouse. In rage and despair I resolved to extricate myself and my companions from our awful situation, and to repay the Bolsheviki for their treachery.

We had our revolvers, but of food—not a bite.

I knew that, if we went far enough eastward we should certainly strike the Trans-Caspian Railway, but we resolved unanimously to keep on our way to Khiva. Yet how could we reach it without food or water none of us could pretend to say; so we sat down and held a council of war. Khiva, we knew, was almost three hundred miles northward of us; Merv about twenty miles southward. It would be impossible to reach Merv even without an adequate supply of water. The morning dragged on, and, when the hot hours came, we clustered in the scanty shade of the little oasis and drank from its one well, in order to allay not only the burning thirst we suffered but the pangs of hunger. The torrid afternoon passed terribly, but at last evening came and brought some slight relief, though our hunger by this time was extreme.

Suddenly my servant uttered a loud cry and pointed to the south. At first I could see nothing. Then I made out a string of horsemen and camels slowly rising out of the evening haze and making for the spot on which we stood, which was, indeed, their only possible camping-place for the night.

They drew nearer, and we were able to see that they were a party of merchants, evidently from Herat; men of various Eastern nationalities, Hindus,

Persians, Afghans, in the charge of a group of Kirghiz who were acting as their guides.

It then transpired that they were going to Khiva, where they hoped to sell carpets and other merchandise at enhanced prices. I had met more than one of these men during my short stay in Afghanistan, and, since several of them were quite aware of my identity and connections, they agreed to advance me a sufficient sum to enable me to proceed on my journey.

For the next ten days we jogged slowly over the everlasting scrub until we arrived at Khan Kui, where two caravan-routes meet. At this place there was a large, vacant, cheerless serai, which smelt abominably of camels.

The Kirghiz availed themselves of the chance afforded by the halt to begin a debauch on *hashish*. They grouped themselves round the walls and puffed slowly at their long pipes. They swayed from side to side, each singing a line of a dismal ballad. It was impossible to escape the wailing noise of the singers or the insistent chattering of the merchants, who lied to each other with the consummate art one finds in the American bag-man. This was merely amusing, but when some of the Kirghiz, remembering my character as a mullah, broke into sneers

regarding Mussulmans—for, as I have said, they are very bad Mahommedans—it was rather more than I could tolerate.

“ Silence, you unbelieving dogs ! ” I cried. “ Is it not enough that you intoxicate yourselves like beasts, and now must add blasphemy to your folly ? ”

Some of the graver merchants added their protestations to mine, and within a few minutes I was the centre of a fierce altercation. Sticks, whips and other weapons were seized, and a right royal fight ensued. When the *mêlée* was at an end I felt sufficiently exhausted to lie down thankfully on a handful of ill-smelling straw, and, pillowing my head on a camel-bag, I fell asleep almost at once.

When I awoke the Kirghiz had all disappeared. I heard stealthy sounds outside, however, and going into the open I saw them in the very act of departure. Drawing my revolver, I called upon them to halt. As none of them were armed with modern fire-arms they wavered and asked me what I wanted. A long and tiresome argument ensued, in which I was blamed as the initiator of all the mischief. At first the Kirghiz swore they would not escort the party another yard if my friends and I were to accompany it, but at last they consented not to leave us behind.

Three days later we arrived at Khiva. But I

was full of misgiving, for I was well aware that the Bolsheviks were supreme in the place, and that it would go hard with me and my companion if they learned our identity. Indeed, I fully believe that had I known what we were fated to go through in Khiva I should have preferred to turn my horse's head and face once more the perils of the Desert of Kara-kum.

CHAPTER VII

THROUGH KHIVA, BOKHARA AND SAMARKAND

As the party of merchants, and Kirghiz guides to which my companion and I had attached ourselves, approached the gates of Khiva I was by no means reassured to see the Bolshevik uniform of the officials stationed there. They at once demanded our passports. I had only the papers I had received from the Bolshevik authorities at Merv. But I was somewhat comforted by the recollection that there is no telegraphic communication between Merv and Khiva. So, taking my courage in both hands, I produced the yellow slips of paper that described our party, and handed them to the sergeant-major, whose portly presence occupied most of the narrow gateway. To my intense relief he merely glanced at them and handed them back to me with a curt nod.

Two of the merchants, who had agreed to finance me temporarily, now suggested that my friend Shah Baz and I should put up at the same serai as themselves. To this I gladly agreed. When we had refreshed ourselves, and rested a little, Shah Baz

informed me that he intended to leave for Bokhara on the following day, since that was, after all, his objective. So I parted from him with regret.

Then, leaving my servant Rahmat Khan in the serai, I sallied forth with another friend, Salim Husain, to see Khiva. We walked through some of the principal streets and entered the bazaar. I was now in funds, for one of my merchant friends had provided me with an adequate, if not liberal, supply of cash. Since I was in need of a pair of shoes we made our way toward the booths of the shoemakers. After an inordinate amount of bargaining I got what I required. But while my friend also was pricing shoes I heard a heavy step behind me and saw an Uzbek in the uniform of the Bolshevik police pass the door of the booth. He fixed his small, beady eyes suspiciously upon us, and for a moment he almost halted, but at length he passed on, and we, having paid the shoemaker, made our way back to the serai.

After dinner, while we were smoking with the two merchants whose guests we were, I was horrified to see the Uzbek policeman enter the room. I felt instinctively that trouble was brewing, but I kept my seat and pretended not to notice him. He was not, however, to be ignored in this fashion, and with a

great deal of official pomposity he came forward and demanded that I should accompany him at once to police headquarters. The merchants were about to interfere, but, since I had no desire to drag them into the affair, I at once rose, and, followed by Salim Husain, accompanied the man into the street, where my servant was already awaiting me.

I felt convinced that the end had come, but I resolved to make one bid for liberty. As we were going down a narrow lane, which at the moment was almost empty, I touched the policeman on the arm and said to him, "My friend, what does this mean?"

"You will find that out quickly enough," he replied gruffly, and closing one eye, he made an unpleasant clicking sound, suggestive of shooting.

"Look here," I cried, "don't be a fool. You know perfectly well that these Russians are merely playing with us. Using us as tools for their own political ends."

"I know I am paid by them," he said with a laugh, "and that is all I need to know."

"Suppose I were to pay you better?" I suggested, playing my last card.

He shook his head. "It's far too risky. I daren't do it."

"Listen to me," I said sternly. "You are a Mussulman like myself. Are you going to betray a man of your own faith? I will give you half the money I have if you will report that you cannot find me, and I assure you that I will leave the town at once."

His eyes sparkled. "Out with your money, then."

Now I was not a little surprised at this, for as a rule the Uzbek is by no means a covetous man. "Do you accept my offer, then?" I asked.

"I do, if you promise to leave the town at once."

I opened my wallet and counted out half the notes it contained. He seized the little bundle with a grunt of satisfaction and at once made off down the lane as quickly as he could.

We then lost no time in hurrying back to the serai and acquainting our merchant friends with what had taken place. In the very kindest way they at once placed three animals at our disposal, and told us that we should take the road along the Oxus to Krasnovodsk on the Caspian. It would then be possible for us to make our way from there into Persia, and thence into Afghanistan. They assured us that such a proceeding would be much safer than pushing on to any other point.

So, once more showing our passports at the gate, with the guard of which the police authorities had evidently not thought it necessary to communicate, we were soon trotting rapidly in a south-easterly direction.

After riding for about three days through Khivan territory, we came once more to the desert and passed the wonderful ruins of old Tatar cities.

By and by we found the country more fertile, but we were not at all reassured by the occasional glimpses we had of raiding parties of Kirghiz. The Kirghiz are descendants of Tatar tribes and rather resemble the Uzbeks. They exist to a great extent on horse-flesh and mare's milk. Many of their tribal customs are, indeed, connected with horses, which they breed in herds.

The horses the merchants had so kindly given us were rather indifferent animals—gift horses which we were not at liberty to look in the mouth. They greatly amused the Kirghiz, who, to a man, are ardent connoisseurs of horse-flesh. I had reason to know, however, that the beast I rode belied its looks and had a good deal of speed. So, one day, when I was being mildly chaffed by a Kirghiz chieftain regarding the sorry appearance of my mount, I offered to wager him my horse against his that

I would outdistance him in a race of about a mile.

"That would scarcely be a good arrangement," he said in the shrewd manner of his people, "because, if your horse beat mine, I should want to have him and not be able to procure him, whereas if mine came in first and you lost yours, I should in common hospitality have to give him back to you rather than allow you to make the journey to Krasnovodsk on foot. Also, if your horse were to come off the winner, the reputation of my stud would suffer so greatly that I should find it hard to dispose of any of them."

"That is scarcely a sportsman's view of the affair," I retorted, "but I will take the risk, and if you win, I will undertake to forfeit my horse and not ask you for another."

"Fools cannot be cured," he said, shrugging his shoulders upon the well-known Uzbek proverb. "You must have your own way." And he had our horses brought.

Beside his well-groomed steed, with its arched neck and fine fetlocks, mine looked a sorry hack, indeed. But we jumped into our saddles, an Uzbek fired his rifle into the air, and we were off.

We had agreed to race to a stunted tree about half a mile away, which formed one of the few landmarks on the broad steppe, to go around this and return to the starting-point. At first I could not get more than a trot out of my animal, which seemed in a terribly obstinate mood, but I remembered I had seen English jockeys sit as far forward upon the withers of the animal as possible; almost on its neck. From the moment I tried the stratagem it proved successful. I forged ahead and slowly began to overtake the chieftain, who, in the usual Tatar fashion during a race, was guiding his horse with his feet, and waving his arms. He rode like a centaur, but I felt that my seat in the saddle was by far the more scientific one, and when I passed him at the stunted tree he uttered a loud exclamation of surprise. After that he had never a chance. We were going at such a pace that I feared my old "Rosinante's" wind would not hold out; but we came in an easy first and not in the least exhausted.

Then the chieftain arrived looking crestfallen. A number of his people had collected, and he was distinctly annoyed. He called me aside, and, for a moment said nothing, biting his lip, and looking at me out of his little slanting eyes.

"I must have your horse," he said at last. "I

cannot afford to let it go. What price do you want for it?"

Now I did not want him to feel that I had intentionally humiliated him; for the Kirghiz are insanely proud.

"I will be quite content," I said, "to exchange him for a horse fit to carry me to Krasnovodsk. The horse you were riding just now will, in fact, suit me admirably."

"First of all," he said, "will you answer me as man to man? Have you used any magic on that horse?"

At this I laughed aloud.

"You laugh," said the chieftain irritably, "but you were afraid to sit upon its back and actually bestrode its neck!"

I then explained to him the English and American system of riding in horse-races, but could scarcely disabuse him of the idea that there was magic in what I had done. So the exchange was made.

Without further adventure we arrived at Charju, from where trains go to their western terminus at Krasnovodsk. It is a bustling railway junction in Turkomania, and is in fact the terminus, or, more correctly, the commencement of the Trans-Caspian Railway.

It occurred to me that, were I able to sell our horses at anything like a fair price, we might manage to bring our little party in safety to our destination.

I went to the station to ask the fare, and I was at once requested by a Bolshevist official to show my passport. Now I speak Persian fluently and have so Persian an appearance that I have acted as an interpreter to many Oriental Royalties. So at the railway station in Charju I felt sure of my ability to evade the unnecessary red tape. Accordingly, when he demanded my *visa*, I shook my head as if I did not understand him, and replied that I had just come from Persia.

Of course I knew that the Russians were doing their best to make a good impression on the Persians, and when he heard my story he smiled, and held out a huge paw for me to shake. Accepting the proffered hand I entered into conversation with him, and in a few minutes we had become friendly. I found him, politics apart, a decent fellow. He invited me into his little room for a cup of tea. I told him that I was bound for Bokhara to take up a position with an uncle there who was a well-known importer of carpets, but that I had been robbed in the streets that morning and had now nothing left except my horses with which to pay my own way and

my friend's to Bokhara. He offered to try to have the horses sold for me, and I told him that, if I could get them disposed of at once, I would accept a lower figure than their real value.

According to arrangement, therefore, Salim Husain, my serving-man, and I brought the horses round to the station at eight o'clock. Our Bolshevik friend was waiting for us.

"Look here," he said, "I'll tell you what I can do. Give me those four horses and I will procure you three railway passes to Bokhara."

It was a fool's bargain, but there was nothing else for it. But I would not give up the horses until the official brought back both passes and passports, so he went off to get them.

He returned with the railway passes, looking exceedingly glum. "It's a pity you didn't tell me the truth about yourself," he said. "The police are not pleased with you, and the sooner you make yourself scarce the better. You cannot travel by train without passports. I advise you to make a bolt for it at once."

"Well, you shan't be the loser," I said, and, slipping my hand into my bosom, I pulled out a ruby ring—an heirloom—which I kept as a last resource, and always wore suspended from a piece of silk.

To my intense surprise, however, he refused the proffered gift.

"No, no," he said, waving it away, "I couldn't think of it. You see I am a *real* Communist. Now don't let the grass grow under your feet. I will say you slipped off while I was at the passport office. Go on your horses, I do not want them."

There is nothing to recount regarding our long ride Bokharaward, for we took care to give larger villages along the railway line a particularly wide berth. In fact we did not see a single Bolshevik official during the whole journey, which occupied the best part of a fortnight.

At intervals we came to a riverside mosque with small dome and tiny minaret, and at these places we were invariably received with kindness; for there is freemasonry among Moslems.

At last we reached Yakotut. There, after giving our horses a couple of days to recruit, we readily disposed of them at a fair price. We were equally fortunate in the matter of passports. I became acquainted with a friendly mullah who knew Shah Baz and could assure me of his safe arrival in Bokhara. It happened that this mullah was intimate with an Uzbek official of high standing in the Bolshevik service, and induced him to procure us

passports in our own names. Thus equipped we had nothing to fear, and making a slow ride of it for Bokhara we arrived there in a day and a half.

But here we were immediately subjected to a searching examination by an official of the Bokharian Soviet. He was a decidedly difficult person to deal with, and I saw at once that he was suspicious of us; chiefly, I think, because I had tried to purchase a pair of boots. I succeeded, however, in dissipating his distrust, and we took up our quarters in the new caravanserai, which is only about two hundred yards from the Amir's palace.

After a week's stay in Bokhara we set out, in company with my old friend Shah Baz, for the ancient city of Samarkand.

I had by this time communicated with my friends in Kabul, and had requested them to send to Bokhara sufficient funds to allow me to complete my journey.

When at last we reached the city I could hardly believe my eyes. Under the rule of the Soviet it had become a centre not only for coal-mining but also for the manufacture of small arms and machine-guns. The people in the streets looked dejected. They were, I learned, little less than slaves, and were forced to go down the coal mines. If they

objected to doing that they were forced into the army.

I knew that Bokhara was the home of one of the branches of the "Oriental Institute," at which the natives of Central Asia are trained to preach the Bolshevik doctrine to their compatriots, and I resolved that, if it were at all possible, I would investigate this precious institution, and whilst visiting the Shrines there. Shah Baz tried to dissuade me, but my curiosity was aroused and it is well-nigh impossible to lull it to sleep.

One morning, therefore, when I knew that Shah Baz had gone to the baths, I called at the Institute and inquired for the director. I was received politely enough, and after the usual formalities was asked my business. I replied that I wished some work in translating languages, of which I had a sound and wide experience. The director, who was a Hindu, told me that they had eight hundred students on the roll, but were very short of teachers, and especially of translators with a knowledge of Hindustani and Persian who could render newspaper paragraphs into Turki. He asked to see my passports with which he professed himself quite satisfied, and offered to put me in charge of a newspaper translation depôt; a proposal which I immediately accepted.

I, therefore, presented myself at the Institute on the following morning and was immediately conducted by the director to that part of it in which the press bureau was situated.

I found my colleagues to be a most amusing parcel of nondescripts. One was an Uzbek with a smattering of Russian, rather less Persian, and a few phrases of restaurant French of which he was ridiculously proud. He told me he had learned the last from the baggageman of a derelict theatrical company at Orenburg. He was for ever trotting out such phrases as "*C'est bon!*" "*Mal de tête*" (àpropos of his *hashish* smoking) and other tag-ends of the school-room. Another man, of mixed Russian and Turki origin, was an anarchist and free-thinker of the virulent type, with about as much intelligence as a rabbit. He occasionally indulged in prolonged flights of turgid rhetoric, and his conversation was modelled on that of the heroes of Maxim Gorky. There was also a quiet little Persian journalist who had been "drafted" from Azerbaijan, where he had worked on a local paper, and who seemed to be a fish out of water.

This man would come and sit beside my desk and look fixedly at me in the most disconcerting way. I felt sure he was very ill, and I said so.

"I am dying," he said. "I have been an invalid for years, and this place is finishing me."

He seemed to me to be suffering from Bright's disease, and, in a moment of forgetfulness, I wrote him a prescription, in the hope that he might get it made up at one of the local Russian dispensaries.

The next day the director came bustling over to me with the prescription in his hand. "You wrote this, I understand."

I admitted that I had done so.

"Now listen, my friend," he rapped out, "I scarcely know what to make of you. I have information that you are a mullah travelling with another mullah, who is well-known in Bokhara. Yet you seem to have a good deal of journalistic knowledge, and now you write a prescription which shows that you have studied medicine. What does all this mean?"

"It means nothing more than that I have studied medicine," I said.

He shook his head. "You seem to have studied far too many things," he said, looking at me with great earnestness. Then he turned away abruptly and left me feeling very uneasy.

I quickly found that the bureau was one of the

most efficient falsehood factories in any of the five continents. The wildest yarns arrived regarding the condition of affairs in Great Britain. The coal strike, we were told, had precipitated a wide-spread revolution. The trade-unions had formed a government, and Mr. H. G. Wells had been nominated the first president of the British Soviet, with Mr. Ramsay Macdonald as minister for foreign affairs. Irish torpedo-boats had blown up the entrance to Liverpool docks, and Mr. Lloyd George had fled to France. The majority of my colleagues implicitly believed in these reports, and looked sourly at me for laughing at them.

But my Bolshevik press experience came to a sudden conclusion. One day I found on my desk a cutting from an English paper, the name of which it would be unkind to mention, containing an attack upon the Indian policy of the government. As I was perusing it the director stole up behind me and said suddenly, in English, "That's good stuff for us, isn't it?"

"Good stuff!" I replied, in the same language, quite off my guard. "If some of those fellows only knew——"

"Oh, then, you know English," said the Hindu, looking at me queerly. "You have still another

accomplishment. Did you learn that also in England, may I ask?"

"Of course I did," I replied warmly. "What is the matter with you? When are your absurd suspicions to cease?"

"My friend," he said, regarding me closely, "I never have suspicions, only intuitions," and without another word he hurried off. A moment later I heard him running quickly down the stairs.

A few minutes after this incident my little Persian friend came over to me. "If you will take my advice," he said, "you will go, now. I hear that the director has communicated with the police."

Shaking him hastily by the hand, I dashed down the rickety staircase in the rear of the building, hurried to a garage, and, after a good deal of wrangling, hired a fast motor-car for one 'day, to take me to Tash Kupri.

In ten minutes we were bowling down the eastern road. We arrived at our destination in about three and a half hours, dismissed the car, and at once began making preparations for the journey to Kershi, from where I intended to go to Bokhara again.

After about a week at Kershi, a plan grew in my mind that I should change my name, return to Bokhara by railway and proceed to Tashkent, from

whence I could take the Orenburg-Tashkent Railway to the latter town, the great centre of Bolshevik propaganda. But I did not foresee that this last mentioned railway would be closed to me; closed in such a manner that I might not be permitted to have a good look at Tashkent.

I procured the kind of passport I wanted, an easy enough matter at Kershi, trimmed my beard and moustache and got into the train, feeling altogether a different person.

It took an unconscionable time to reach Bokhara; three entire days. We stopped at every wayside station, and, as we approached the city, were held up nearly every twenty minutes by a series of engines, each of which seemed to draw scores of coal-trucks. These were, of course, all going northward from the coal-mines and would be switched off at a point on the line that joins the Orenburg-Tashkent Railway, en route for Moscow.

It was early morning when we steamed into Bokhara at last. Alighting from the train, I showed my passport, which was scarcely looked at. There was not so much opportunity for adventure beyond the propaganda centre, in Bokhara as in other parts of Turkestan, for although the Amir of Bokhara had been dethroned, expatriated, and was living in exile

in Afghanistan, the local Soviet government was by no means in good odour with the Uzbeg population, and had to behave warily.

The life of the city centres in the square, about which are clustered imposing mosques and religious colleges. But the scene of liveliest activity is the shore of a small artificial lake, surrounded with trees, in the midst of which stand barber-shops, tea-houses and refreshment-booths. The barbers' booths draw many to the spot, for the Uzbeg is a very strict Mahommedan and has his head shaved almost daily, although he wears a long, flowing beard. Barbers in the East are generally surgeons as well, and those of Bokhara are uncommonly skilled in removing the 'dreaded rishta, a worm that breeds in the drinking water and lays its eggs in the human body.

Much of the trade here is done by barter. This arises from the fact that the currency is now practically all paper, and that the people have grown so distrustful of its constant fluctuations in value that they prefer other means of exchange. When, therefore, on a shopping expedition, they carry with them considerable quantities of rice and block tea—at one time regarded as currency throughout the length and breadth of Turkestan—and give these



FRIDAY MARKET SCENE IN RUKHARA

in exchange for anything they have occasion to purchase. It is a comical sight to see a grave and reticent Uzbek, who has just had his head shaved, pour a quantity of rice into the barber's cupped hands, or a housewife, heavily veiled, proffering three large squares of compressed tea in exchange for a small earthenware dish. The people are all on ration tickets.

Another of the sights of Bokhara is the ram-fighting that seems to go on from morning to night in the open square. As soon as one batch of ram-fighters retires, another takes its place. The yet more numerous cock-fighting fraternity is equally diligent. But the joyous parties of these devotees of sport are only too frequently broken up by the appearance of a Bolshevik officer representing the local Ispolkom, who asks the pleasure-seekers to show their employment cards. Woe to the unfortunate who fails to exhibit a card. He is immediately taken to the chief of police, and work is allotted to him. He is usually sent to the oil-fields of Ferghana.

During my stay in Bokhara I attended a session of the Soviet. It consists of twenty-seven members, elected by themselves, and not by the Uzbek people. It meets in the old fort of the exiled Amir of Bokhara. On the occasion on which I was present they were

debating on the subject of the province of Ferghana. From personalities some of the members passed to open hostility and blows. One delegate drew a knife and flourished it within an inch of the throat of another member. In a moment a panic ensued, and the spectators crowded to the door. I managed to get clear with a few bruises. I heard later that the delegate who behaved so "unconstitutionally" had been seriously wounded in the scuffle.

I was shortly afterwards informed that, since no one may exist in the Republic without some ostensible means of livelihood, I must find one or have it found for me. The Propaganda School fortunately for me was removed to Tashkent by then. Knowing quite well that I was in danger of slavery of the most degrading kind, I made up my mind to seek employment there.

In that city, accordingly, I soon began to teach foreign languages, but was told by the authorities that such employment could not on any account be regarded as "work," and that an attempt to gain money by it was the act of a speculator. Food was so scarce in Bokhara, too, that one day I accepted with pleasure the invitation of a local worthy, named Mahommed Beg, to dine with him at his private residence. He had made great preparations, despite

the ration rules, but, just as the meal was about to be served, a Bolshevik officer, accompanied by three armed soldiers, appeared and announced that he must "requisition" Mahommed Beg's carpets and rugs, for they were required to decorate the hall where a friendly foreign Mission was about to be entertained. In vain my host protested. The officer marched off with the carpets which my friend was destined never to see again.

Though I already knew full well that Bokharian Bolshevism is of the Moscow brand I determined to obtain work in some official capacity, in order that I might have a still better chance later of getting out of the country.

When, therefore, I applied at the Labour Bureau, and informed the chief that I was well versed in languages, he offered to accept my services at what seemed an enormous salary but which actually was equivalent to only a few shillings *per diem*. On the following day I was installed at the Application Office, which scarcely deserved its name; for those who "applied" there were forced to do so by the Ispolkoms, and certainly did not repair to its gloomy corridors because they were wildly anxious to obtain employment in the coal-mines of Samarkand, or the cotton or oil-fields of Ferghana.

The majority of the applicants were either very poor or fairly well-to-do. In the first instance we dealt with them shortly. If they seemed strong enough they were assigned to the coal-mines or the oil-fields, and hustled off by soldiers. The well-off were, it is true, permitted to purchase better treatment, but they were not paid for the intensely hard manual labour they were forced to do, and they were wretchedly underfed.

It seemed to me that nearly everyone in Bokhara was living on melons. There had been a very large crop, and, since it was impossible to export it, it was being used for home consumption.

I remained at the Labour Bureau for some weeks, and can honestly affirm that during that period I was always fiercely hungry. I grew to detest the melons and the wretched black bread. The work, too, was tiresome to a degree. It consisted chiefly in assigning the Uzbegs to various mines, and filling in countless forms of extraordinary length and complexity.

One day, when I was telling a poor Uzbeg how to treat an ulcerated condition of his leg, a Bolshevik official, overhearing me, remarked that I must have studied medicine. Incautiously I replied that I had, and the same evening I was asked to step into the

office of the manager of the bureau, where I found the local chief of police. The two men put me through a tremendous cross-examination, and asked me the last place from which I had come. I told them, and then, for a cause I could never fully ascertain—for beyond my innocent desire to travel in the world of Islam on my way to Mecca there had been no other motive—I was made, on the instant, to board the train for Tashkent, and ultimately for Orenburg, where I would have lingered like others, or perhaps starved, had I not escaped to the Arab Sea. But it, nonetheless, was an education to me, and there I learnt the extent of the Bolshevik war preparations. Now, propaganda, backed by actual fighting force, is a very real menace to Europe and Asia alike.

In spite of repeated warnings the extent of Bolshevik threat to the British Empire is not fully realized in this country. Many are no doubt aware of the Soviet endeavour to undermine English prestige in Asia through anti-British propaganda, but few comprehend the magnitude of military preparedness with which Red Russia is backing her efforts.

Let it, therefore, be said at once that the Soviet Government to-day possesses perhaps one of the

finest armies, and certainly infinitely larger than any retained by even the most advanced European Power. The surprising fact is that this advancement has been achieved out of chaos and disruption; for the Bolsheviki began their day with practically no army as such.

In 1917, when the late Czar's troops fell to pieces, Russia had over a million soldiers, but there was neither discipline nor food. In less than a year matters were put right, and military progress has been maintained, internal and external difficulties notwithstanding.

With the enormous population, approaching some 140,000,000 souls, the Bolsheviki were never troubled for man-power. The present figures of the Red army reach 730,000, which is composed of 28 Cavalry divisions, and 12 divisions of Infantry; each division consisting of 18,500 men. The transport which is attached to the infantry units far exceeds its former figure in so far as it is now 3,500 wagons and 9,000 Arabs.

A few years ago, when disruption arose in the ranks of the Bolshevik political leaders, a new force was brought into being with the duty of protecting only the political groups of Soviet Russia. It has now ten regiments; one is stationed at Leningrad,

two at Moscow, and the rest are distributed in the Ukraine, Turkestan, Volga, and other provinces.

Every person between the ages of 18 and 38 is liable to compulsory military service, and boys are trained at the age of 16 for two years, so that they may be able to put in a three years' service with the Colours. But the greatest strength lies in the fact that a batch of no less than 600 officers is permanently retained at the Moscow Army Headquarters; so that, within a month, the existing army could be expanded to four times its size with the least difficulty. Meanwhile, these reserve officers are engaged in military research.

Some two or three years ago Soviet Russia was the biggest buyer of military stores, but she is now practically independent of all foreign manufacture. Russia can boast to-day of no less than a dozen rifle manufactories, only three of which are State controlled. At Leningrad and Puttiloff guns are being turned out in considerable quantities, and in quality they compare favourably with those of European make. Tanks and aeroplanes are being perfected with amazing rapidity, and Russia unquestionably owns at the present moment the largest number of aeroplanes for military purposes. But perhaps the most interesting side of this increase of Russia's

army is the evolution of a women's corps, and I have reason to believe that in certain respects these peasant girl-soldiers were able to acquit themselves very much more favourably than even the stalwart sons of the Caucasus, certainly with the machine-guns and dispatch riding.

Out of the 730,000 of the standing army two-thirds are to be considered as first line men, trained and hardened soldiers, with three or more years' training, while the rest are younger men. But by far the most significant element consists in those officers who are devoting their full attention to perfecting the industrial and military mobilization for war purposes.

Every now and then a war craze is started in Moscow, to test the efficiency of mobilization of the Red Russian Army, which, as Lenin said, "is the torch bearer of freedom and liberty for the unfortunate peoples of Asia."

CHAPTER VIII

ESCAPE FROM CENTRAL ASIA

THAT sentimental ogre the Russian has undergone a queer metamorphosis since the advent of Bolshevism. Turgueneff and Dostoievsky painted him as a species of philosophical Caliban whose notions revolved in a shadowy sphere betwixt lunacy and a flatulent altruism. Now he has become a sort of hybrid between a sea-lawyer and a missionary, with a dash of the hooligan. That he is a bore of the first water goes without saying. No nation can assume wholesale a reach-me-down system of sham, social "uplift," as it has done, and retain its character, or anything resembling interest for the outsider, and your up-to-date Muscovite, as a kind of perambulating Marxian text-book, although amusing enough at first, soon grows intolerably tiresome.

I was soon tired of his sententious attitude when I left Orenburg. But when I got to Aralsk, on the Sea of Aral, four hundred miles lower down the line, and found his ideas commingling with Kirghiz

surliness and ignorance, I began to lose my temper. And to lose one's temper in Bolshevist Asia is much too like the sport of lion-taming to be quite healthy.

I shall never forget those tempestuous days on the shores and islands of that vast and dreary inland Sea of Aral, which has an area almost as big as Ireland. It is humorous enough to think of them now, sitting in a comfortable study in a snug villa in England, but to ponder too long on them makes the bones ache and the spine grow uncomfortably chilly, and I can say quite definitely that Aralsk and its neighbourhood is struck off my list of holiday resorts. Only Bulldog Drummond or Tom Mix would ever think of popping over there for a little rest and change. And should they think of it I would advise them to book single fares only. For to die with shoes off in the Aral district is regarded as the worst possible bad form.

The trouble began when, at Aralsk, I tossed a lighraz piece high in the air to decide whether I would go by canal across the desert or by water over the "lake." "Tails!" and the gold piece said "water."

As a pilgrim bound for the holy cities I was staying at the overcrowded serai, or public inn, from which I was desirous of departing at once, for

a variety of reasons so numerous that I won't inflict them upon my reader. My brother pilgrims, on hearing my decision, agreed to accompany me, and we hired a flat-bottomed, Kirghiz fishing-boat to take us to Kizil Bullok, on the west coast of the sea, where the shrines of Kharazm we wished to visit are situated.

We arrived there only slightly damaged, and, our pilgrimage accomplished, we decided to visit the island of Kug Aral, the largest island in the Sea of Aral, as the fees which the keepers of the shrine extracted by way of hospitality were pretty high in the piratical scale.

So we chartered another fishing vessel, and, as the old ballad says, "We had not gone a league, a league" when the weather itself grew Bolshevistic. There's a wind in these parts calculated to blow the hair off a human, and, its flat keel notwithstanding, the boat cut along like a Herrishoffer off Marble Head. A blinding storm of sand-dust blew off the land, and the Kirghiz boatmen pattered prayers, and threw pieces of rope into the water as rescue signals. One could see nothing but sand, but just as I was making up my mind to a big swallow of water a large island loomed ahead, or rather an extensive mud-flat festooned with huts and fishing-boats.

This was the island of Nikolai, and there was nothing for it but to get out and walk. I cursed inwardly, my recent pious vigils at Kizil Bullok notwithstanding, for I knew that the Bolsheviks had a naval base on this island, the purpose of which is to keep the Trans-Caspian tribes in order, and that any foreigner landing there would be suspect with a vengeance.

Introducing ourselves at one of the fishing huts, we were kindly received by an old woman and her son, who regaled us with salt fish and milk. But just as we were lighting cigarettes after the meal a naval officer arrived from the Rear-Admiral in charge of the station, and asked to see our credentials. My London-made camera at once attracted his attention.

"*Ohé!*" he cried, "and where do you hail from, my friend? An English camera, eh? How am I to know you are a pilgrim, as you represent yourself to be? You know that this island is forbidden to strangers, I suppose?"

"We didn't come here because we wanted to," I retorted, for I had expected something of the sort, "you must blame the storm. I'll be only too happy to leave once it's over, you can be very certain."

"Oh, you'll leave all right," he sneered, "only with a little more circumstance than you arrived.

Take that camera, and come with me to the Admiral at once."

The Admiral—I heard later he had been a skipper on a paddle-boat on the Volga—liked me as little as his lieutenant, and the upshot of it was that I was sent to Krasnovodsk on the Caspian to work in the dock-yards there. Protests and appeals were only met by jeers, and next day I was bundled into a crowded military train on the coast and taken by a circuitous route, almost as long as that from Berlin to Paris, to my unwanted destination.

Days passed, the food was abominable, and I grew so weak that by the time we reached the Caspian port I could scarcely stand. But they allowed me twenty-four hours' rest in a draughty barracks, and then, somewhat recovered, I was placed in a gang told off to load the small steamer *Bokhara* with cotton bales for Baku.

Three days was about enough of this, and as I grew stronger I began to get restive, and to think of extrication from my plight. The toil was terrifically hard, the bales enormously heavy, and the heat unbearable. But my mind was working overtime, and at last I conceived a stratagem by which I might manage to make myself scarce.

To speed things up we had been told off into

shifts, day and night gangs, and it fell in with my scheme that I was included in the latter. The little steamer was a tanker, and the reservoirs in her fore part were heavy with Baku oil, which had not yet been drawn off in order to keep her well down in the water, and render loading more easy.

Oil and cotton! What a blaze it would make thought a companion I had made—a Kurdish chief whose reduced fortune had driven him from home.

He had a baker's dozen of cigarettes left, and a small paper of cardboard matches. As we were numbered off for the night-shift he took care to be at the tail of the line, and when we went on board, bales on shoulders, he deposited his load, and then dropped on the deck and wriggled forward to where he had guessed the tanks lay. He found them, easily enough, as he told me afterwards, down a little hatchway. He then unscrewed the vent, and heaped a pile of cotton-waste on the top. Then, striking a match with great caution, he set fire to the pile. It smouldered, and when he was certain it was well alight, he sauntered back to the gangway and took his place once more in the shoreward-going gang. Although not a party to the act, I was nevertheless interested in what he told me, and could do nothing to stop the explosion.

With my heart in my mouth I waited and waited. Had the cotton waste smouldered out? Bale after bale I carried patiently on to the deck of the *Bokhara*, yet still not a streak of smoke rose from the hatchway. Then all at once it came. A terrific burst of flame and smoke belched forth from the man-hole, and a yell of dismay rose from the guards on shore. Higher and higher leapt the flames, and almost from the first the fire burned with the fury of Sheol. All was confusion. There was no provision for an outbreak of fire on board, and the officials in charge seemed helpless.

Now was my time. Elbowing my way to the officer in charge I hurriedly told him that I was prepared to volunteer to run off the oil, the one chance of saving the vessel. The oil-cocks were situated in the cubby-hole under the hatchway, and if this were done the ship might be saved.

In panic he assented. "It may mean death for you," he said despairingly, "but if you succeed, I'll speak up for you to the Chief. At it, and see what you can do."

I needed no second bidding but rushed up the gangway. To approach the pillar of flame might have daunted the heart of a Rustem, but my object was to get on the other side of it. With the howls

of the crowd behind me, and the roar of the fire in front, I sprinted across the deck, and, getting well behind the geyser of flame, crept to the side and dived into the water. Down I went, and pushing my feet against the steel plates of the vessel I swam under water for some yards, then rose to the surface. Then, taking a long breath, I dived deeply again, and none too soon, for what I had expected happened during my second plunge. With a roar like the opening convulsion of a volcano the oil-tank of the *Bokhara* exploded, and the wreckage from the deck came pounding down the water on all sides.

A horrible silence followed, and I rose to the surface in absolute darkness save for the twinkling lights of the dockyard. Then babel broke out on the jetty. Oaths, commands, yells were mingled as in a battle, and, serious as my plight was, I could not help laughing at the riot behind me.

But how to proceed? I was at a complete loss. If I swam towards the lights I should certainly fall into the hands of the Russians once more, and if they suspected my half knowledge of the cause of disaster a firing-party would be the least I should have to face. On the other hand, I could not swim the Caspian.

Just as I was giving way to despair I bumped straight into a boat, the dinghy of a small timber-scow which had been berthed near the *Bokhara*. I crawled aboard, untied the rope, unshipped the oars, and cautiously rowed out of the harbour, making as little noise as possible. Then, when some distance from the dock, and putting all I knew into it, I pulled vigorously for the outside of the harbour, and in the direction of the coast.

All night I hugged the coast, and when morning dawned found myself scarcely a stone's-throw from green banks running down from low meadows where large flocks of goats were feeding. By this time I was furiously hungry, so, drawing inshore, I left my craft and jumped on land.

Not a dwelling of any kind was to be seen, but, feeling that I must now be at least six or seven miles from Krasnovodsk, I resolved to strike southwards in the hope of reaching the Persian frontier, about a hundred and eighty miles away. If I could only reach Asterabad, where I had friends, I knew I should be all right, but nearly two hundred miles of travel in such a country as this was a dismal prospect. There were, however, I found, mitigating circumstances. The country is level and fertile, and the people proved kindly.

Most of my money was gone, but if only I could keep out of the hands of the Bolsheviks and shake the dust of Turkestan off my feet, I could cheerfully face even hunger and thirst.

It took me three weeks to make my way back to Asterabad, and absolutely nothing happened en route that seems worth recounting. It was really a tramp from shepherd's hut to shepherd's hut, punctuated by meals of millet bread, cheese and goat's milk. I travelled as a pilgrim, and was everywhere accepted as such till I reached Meshad.

Then my wanderings directed me to the Shrines of Omar, the tent-maker at Nishapour, and I recalled Fitzgerald's efforts at translation of this master singer. I read the Persian, and its English version, and, excellent though the latter was in its way, I felt the two were poles apart. The reason is perhaps obvious because to judge the poetry of Omar by its translation would be as futile as to appreciate the songs of Robert Burns by an Arabic version. This truth dawned upon me the more forcibly as I approached the Shrines of Omar, where the mystic poet lived and died eight centuries ago.

Although it was not yet noon the sun was already making my journey uncomfortable, so I, a wander-

ing pilgrim, sought the coolness of the glade. At the gateway I alighted from my donkey, tied it to a mulberry tree, and walked to the entrance.

Here sat an old man on a carpet, writing a letter for a peasant youth. On my approach he pushed his spectacles up on to his forehead and eyed me suspiciously, but the exchange of salutations of peace and goodwill soon dispelled it. As a privilege from an elder he asked me to sit beside him on the carpet, but when I threw myself unceremoniously on the bare ground with its few tufts of grass it did not take him a moment to recite to me, by way of reprimand, this couplet of Omar :

“ And this delightful Herb, whose tender green
Fledged the River’s lip on which we lean—
Ah! Lean upon it lightly! for who knows
From what once lovely Lip it springs unseen! ”

Listening to this—call it imagination or supernatural impulse what you will—I sensed a spiritual feeling grip me. I rose, lifted my hands, and offered blessings upon Omar, the fount of Oriental Occultism. The venerable scribe, learning my desire to visit the Shrine, began to collect his belongings. Rolling his carpet, he tucked it under his arm; his pen case, of papier mâché, ornamented

with floral designs, he held in his left hand; a stiff reed pen he placed between his cap and his ear, and carrying his staff, he beckoned me to follow him to the interior of the garden.

As Persian gardens go this was not a fine one, but it seemed to be saturated with an air of mysticism. In the centre was the grave of that "Divine Poet of Persia." We both stood motionless and mute, as before a mighty monarch. Then we lifted our hands to bless the spirit of Omar, and my companion, as a true admirer of his country, was so moved that tears trickled down his age-worn cheeks.

"To think that this country of ours," he said, "this our rose garden, should be so altered is a tragedy. Ancient history saw its dawn. We held Eden within our borders, and sent the builders of Babel from the East to the land of the twin rivers. To think that this nursery of culture and civilization should now seek the Western methods, and forget its own, is immeasurably sad. I dread to think that old Persia is dead and a new one is arising. 'O the culture of my country is passing—yes, passing to oblivion. . . . O my country!'" And, as he sang the following couplet of Omar, he sobbed like a child.

"Alas, that Spring should vanish with the rose!
That Youth's sweet-scented Manuscript should close!
The Nightingale that in the Branches sang,
Ah, whence, and whither flown again—who knows?"

We were awakened from our meditation by the sound of music from a corner of the garden. Some one was playing the flute, and a chorus of male voices sang melodiously. The old man told me that I need not go to see the singers because they themselves would be coming to the Shrine presently, and were a band of Dervishes. Presently the music and singing became more distinct, and I could see a dozen or so venerable looking gentlemen wearing high, felt caps and brown mantles, coming towards the Shrine. They hardly noticed us.

In one of the corners of the floor they sat in a circle. The singers sang loudly, and I noticed that a small drum was added to other musical instruments. They sang couplets of Molana Romi, or those of Omar. For some time the singing continued without much apparent appreciation. Then the singer struck the bar of Omar's immortal lines:

"For in and out, above, about, below,
'Tis nothing but a Magic Shadow-show,
Played in a Box whose candle is the Sun,
Round which we Phantom Figures come and go."

On this the whole scene was changed. Silent

figures, clad in voluminous robes, heaved sighs, clapped hands, threw themselves about; some fell flat on their faces; others rose, and, at first, walking slowly round and round with their arms folded; turned several times, then, revolving, dancing, turning with extraordinary velocity, singing loud and long, they repeated in a frenzy of excitement,

“ ’Tis nothing but a Magic Shadow-show. . . .

. . . Phantom Figures come and go,

. . . Come and go.

. . . come and go.”

CHAPTER IX

OMAR AND SHAKESPEARE

As I was passing through some villages on my way to the capital of Persia, a friend showed me a copy of a Persian translation of Shakespeare. It was the work of a Persian of high rank. But why should a Persian, loving Omar as a Persian only can, select Shakespeare for rendering into his language? The explanation is simple. The philosophy of great art is one and the same in all climes and all ages, which can be well attested by a comparison between the ideas underlying the work of the world's chief poets.

Thus, their distant periods and environments notwithstanding, the resemblance between the philosophies of William Shakespeare and Omar Khayyám is neither superficial nor fortuitous, but arises out of that deep and almost supernatural instinct which has always been the concomitant of poetic genius of the first rank. Indeed, the mental likeness between Omar and the Bard of Avon can be

substantiated by scores of passages almost identical in thought and sentiment.

The central idea animating both of these masters of thought and verse is, indeed, the impermanence of humanity, its evanescent and temporal character. Man is the sport of a grim and relentless Fate which treats him as a puppet; an image to be broken for its pleasure. Says Macbeth,

“ Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more : it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.”

Could anything be closer in thought to the first part of this than a quotation from the Rubaiyat?

“ For in and out, above, about, below,
’Tis nothing but a Magic Shadow-show,
Played in a Box whose candle is the Sun
Round which we Phantom Figures come and go.”

Man is indeed clay, mere earth, say both the Eastern and the Western singers in their deeper notes of despondency.

“ Imperial Cæsar, dead and turned to clay
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.”

says Shakespeare, and again and again Omar refers to man’s earthy origin.

But there is a solution for man's woes and sorrows
in Wine.

"Go, suck the subtle blood o' the grape,
Till the high fever seethe your blood to froth
And so 'scape hanging, trust not the physician,"

says Timon of Athens to the thieves. And Timon has a peculiar affinity with Omar. He prefers "the desert to the sown," he espies the folly that lurks in all things worldly, even if he is by no means so sadly jovial as the Persian philosopher or anti-philosopher. And here we have the likeness between Shakespeare and Omar well-defined. Both are indeed anti-philosophers, unfriends of all systems of conventional thought. It is with scorn that Omar refers to the "two-and-seventy jarring sects." These can all be confuted by the juice of the grape, just as Shakespeare believes that the schools, and all their doctrines, can be brought to nought by the power of love as expressed in "Love's Labour's Lost." "The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo," or as we have it in "A Midsummer Night's Dream,"

"The thrice three Muses mourning for the death
Of Learning, late deceased in beggary."

And who is more like Omar than Falstaff, the

drinker with the thinker's brain, the Bacchus with the mind of a Rabelais? "If sack and sugar be a fault, God help the wicked. If to be old and merry be a sin, then many an old host that I know is damned."

Wisdom is, indeed, the constant butt of both poets. Says Omar in a well-known quatrain,

"Why, all the Saints and Sages who discussed
Of the Two Worlds so learnedly, are thrust
Like foolish Prophets forth their Words to scorn,
Are scattered, and their mouths are stopt with dust."

Which is practically what Shakespeare exclaims when he writes,

"There is enough written upon this earth
To stir a mutiny in the mildest thought
And arm the minds of infants to exclaim."

But it is not so much in word or phrase, but in general tendency of thought and spirit that Omar and Shakespeare are akin. Indeed, Omar's notion that the world is a mere puppet-show and that all that is beautiful within it must at length come to an end is echoed in Shakespeare's lines,

"Golden lads and girls all must,
Like chimney-sweepers, come to dust."

Of course Shakespeare does not confine himself to this idea of the triumph of mortality as a general thesis. His imagination was much too universal for

a notion so restricted, whatever the truth it might hold. But it is easy to see nevertheless that the subject of fate beguiled by pleasure for a season, of Kismet momentarily cheated, frequently commended itself to him as suitable for artistic presentation. Thus it obviously underlies the plots of "Antony and Cleopatra" and "Romeo and Juliet," in which human happiness is regarded as the temporary foil to sorrow and destiny.

Perhaps the circumstances of life in the times and environments in which Shakespeare and Omar lived may have given them a similar outlook. At the Persian Court, as at that of Elizabeth, gross favouritism was rife, vice was enthroned in high social circles, and "patient merit" was ignored. In both the England of Shakespeare and the Persia of Omar high spiritual qualities were at a discount, and what might be called a sordid and material outlook prevailed.

Perhaps this sufficed to make these poets disgusted with mundane affairs and to regard them as paltry and undistinguished. But, be that as it may, Shakespeare in a manner partly enfranchised himself from this crude and anarchical philosophy although he never seems altogether to have outsoared it. Rarely does he display that whole-souled and fervent

trust in the Almighty cause of all things which Goethe, Dante and Chaucer constantly exhibit. Omar, on the other hand, runs the whole gamut of blasphemy, and recks not, convinced that Fate is a blundering demon, and that no wisdom inspires the First Cause. If Shakespeare hints more than occasionally at some such state of things, and even says now and again, he still subscribes a doubt. And a doubt in his world was equal to wholesale renunciation in ours. Yes, Omar and Shakespeare have indeed much in common. Like Hamlet, Omar is more than a little "mad."

CHAPTER X

THE INFLEXIBLE PERSIA

SINCE those golden years when Noshairwan ruled, and Hafiz sang to this our own somewhat colourless day, Persia has undergone many vicissitudes. But in one respect the land of the Lion and the Sun is not altered. It has helped the imagination of men throughout the ages, and still retains the power of conquering hearts.

The spirit of philosophy, a happy-go-lucky outlook on life's tragedies, a confirmed belief in the old adage, "What is written is written," is there in Teheran to-day as it was a thousand years ago. It constitutes the inner life of these lovable people, for you have but to walk through the bazaars of the Persian capital, through the groves of its suburbs, or the arcaded streets of a provincial town, and you will both "see" and "smell" the East.

Geographical conditions, as is well known, have a great deal to do with the temperament of the

people, and a favourable climate makes the Persian a happy, natural and simple person, with tremendous emotions. They will laugh just as quickly as they will cry, and be quite in earnest about it.

A practical manifestation of this I observed in Teheran during the "Ushra," or the day of mourning on the tenth of Mohurram. My host secured a place for me on a house-top in a square, from where I could watch the procession to advantage. He himself had gone to swell the crowd. I was there at three. The procession was due then, but it actually arrived at about four-thirty p.m. There is nothing novel in that for either Persia or India. What is, after all, they say, only an hour and a half in the life of the ages?

The first indication of the approach of the procession was a weird sound which seemed to strike my ears from all sides. I could hardly locate it, but presently the thud of the drum, and distant yells of a crowd, indicated the right of the square. The drum sounds and the shouts of the crowd became louder and louder.

The procession at last entered the square. First of all came men with small drums, then men waving tall, black flag-poles with flags bearing Persian inscriptions, passed us. This was followed by a



(Upper) HIS MAJESTY RAZA SHAH PAHLAVI, KING OF PERSIA, WITH HIS MINISTERS
(Lower) PALACE OF THE KING OF PERSIA

number of standard-bearers who bore signs of various descriptions representing swords and scimitars. These they held aloft and waved. But the most picturesque item of all came behind these. About half a dozen men held a piece of black cloth tightly stretched between two poles, on which inscriptions were sewn in gold thread.

The whole crowd, as far as one could see, was composed of men mourners in peculiar disguises, and the realistic touch was supplied by a number who wore long white shirts, the fronts of which were besmeared with red paint to represent blood. They were beating their chests with all their force, and here and there in the crowd one would see a devotee, fresh from Kerbela, beating upon his shirtless chest with a heavy spiked chain, the result being that, in his case, no red paint was required. These were followed by a number of horsemen representing the victorious army of Yazid, and then a magnificent horse was led by, which was supposed to be that of Yazid himself. A wailing chorus amongst the mourners was repeated every other minute. "Husain Chay Shud!" "What happened to Husain?" asked a voice and the mourners cried aloud, "Husain Shaheed Shud! Husain received Martyrdom!" And then they beat upon their

breasts with great force, and each time with renewed energy.

This lasted until dusk, but the scene, however gruesome, leaves a lasting impression upon the mind of the extraordinary sincerity of traditional sympathy and association that so vigorously excites the human suffering in the minds of the Persians. The fact that the memory of a battle which was fought over ten centuries ago should still plunge a nation in such an extreme degree of sorrow is an item of no small significance to those who study the psychology of the Eastern mind.

But who has not read "Omar the Tent-Maker" in the West, and adored that master singer of Ancient Persia?

What then chiefly attracted me was the life of its humanity, because seeing and hearing it makes one appreciate that Persia is the true child of the hoary East. Such a study can give you just a peep in at the window of a Persian's heart. But this can best be done in small hamlets tucked away from the beaten path, and this I wished to do. The village life of a Persian is of another world; it is so foreign that, even in Teheran, people may be amazed to hear of it. In these villages, on my way to Kurdistan, I found mystery, folk-lore and superstition.

For instance, when the birth of a child is expected a mullah is called to the house where such an event is to take place, and no matter what the time, midnight or midday. It is his duty to call the Azan, Call of Prayer, when the birth is imminent.

When a child is born it is not fed on anything else but melted butter and Khakshair. For three days no milk of any kind is given.

A foster-mother may also be employed. For the first three days a dagger is placed under the pillow of the mother with the idea of saving her health from the "sharpness" of the evil eye. The child is wrapped in a quilt, and is tied round with a cord. Beggars, or a tired traveller are not permitted to see a newborn babe, the reason being that the child may not grow up like one of these. The child has various charms suspended round its neck to ward off the evil eye, also a kind of stone, like an opaque piece of glass, round in shape, and about the size of a six-pence, is often fixed to the cap of a child.

The stone is called Sung-Baba-Quli. The shape is supposed to be like a blinded eye which might protrude out of its socket, and is fixed to the cap in case any man with an evil eye should look at the child, when his eye would be blinded like the stone.

Should a child become ill, it is supposed that it

has either become affected by an evil eye or that something has frightened it. At first a trial is made to discover whether the illness is on account of a fright. The child is brought into a room, and four or five women gather together around him. Some aromatic seeds are thrown on a brazier full of blazing charcoal, and at once a certain familiar perfume is emitted through the burning of these seeds; then a whitish aromatic powder is taken by one of the women in the palm of her hand, and with this she goes thrice round the child. The powder is then thrown into the charcoal, and, as it burns, a whitish froth is left, like a sponge. This is taken out of the brazier and placed on the table, and each woman tries to discover what shape the "foam form" represents. One woman fancies, for instance, that it is like a hen, and therefore a hen has frightened the child; a second may think it to be like a frog, and a frog has, therefore, frightened the child. But should it be a case of the evil eye animals are sacrificed.

On the seventh day after the child's birth the naming ceremony is held. This consists of invitations to near relations, and a mullah is also asked to come. The ceremony begins with feasting; then the mullah reads certain passages of the Koran, and the

name of the child is uttered loudly three times in each of his or her ears. It ends with a feast for the relations and a good fee for the mullah.

On the fortieth day after the child's birth a ceremony takes place called the Aab Chalum. The child is taken in the arms, and a piece of cloth, which must be waterproof, is held over him. Some water is thrown on the cloth and allowed to flow down to the ground; the idea being that water has passed over the child. The superstition is that all the bad effects of a malignant eye have for ever been washed off, and that henceforth the child is immune from such. The same day the mother is allowed to come out of her apartments. Henceforth the child is allowed to go anywhere and to anybody, provided that his eyes are smeared with Surma, and an Alif has been placed on his forehead, between his eyes.

A day comes when the hair of the child has to be shaved. A small ceremony is held, and silver or gold, to the weight of the hair, is given to a charity, and a goat is sacrificed. The goat must be killed in a room, *not directly under the sky*, and the portion of the floor on which the blood has been shed must be dug up. In that hole thus dug the skin and bones of the goat are buried. The flesh of the goat

is not given to any parents or relations, but to tigers.

On Thursday nights aromatic seeds are burnt in the house to ward off evil, and the child is not allowed to go out on those evenings.

When children grow up they are either sent to the mixed classes or to the mullah. When quite young, women teachers teach them, and at the break-up of the school the teachers impress the hands and the tongue of a child with a thimble, and say to the child that if the child salutes his parents upon the return to the house the impression will remain on the tongue, whereas, if he is naughty, there will be no impression the next day when the child returns to the school.

The impressions on the palms of the hand are made because if the hands were employed for any mischief the marks of the thimble will disappear. If the child behaves well, and has saluted his parents, but comes to his mother and says that the marks have disappeared, and that he would be punished at school for having none, the mother takes a thimble and impresses the hands and the tongue once more as a mark of good behaviour.

CHAPTER XI

THE HUMAN OIL CURE

FROM this brook-skirted country of the Shahs I then journeyed westward to Kurdistan. No longer did I see the poppy fields or the shepherd boy with his ancient flute.

It was only a short while ago that the world was startled by the news that in Northern Mesopotamia a prodigious quantity of oil had been found. Financial magnates, engineers and hangers-on trekked to the scene, but they knew not what lay beyond the Mosal ranges, merging as they do into those wild mountains of Kurdistan. Had they wandered up those rugged passes the world would have been left guessing as to the reason of their non-return to work on the oil-fields of Iraq.

But it was just there that "evil spirits guided me," as the Persians say.

If sleet is not lashing you as you pass through those haunted Kurdish hills then the howling wind,

laden with freezing temperature, sweeps down from the northern peaks. It was in such weather that I found myself stumbling my way in and out of the gullies, whilst my nag trailed behind. He had long passed the stage of giving me a lift. Nothing resembled him better than a big, wet, brown mouse. He carried my rations, what there was of them—onions, dry bread and honey—and I felt like going on and on towards some unknown destination, although I knew that if only the wind subsided a little I could be in a Kurdish village before sundown.

With heart full of hope I pushed on despite all the physical exhaustion, and longed to turn the bend just before me, beyond which, far below, I could already see fires lit, and fleeting figures crossing and recrossing before its brilliant glow. At last I came round that bend and espied the broad valley, in the centre of which, some five miles away, amidst orchards, nestled the village where I imagined warmth and hospitality awaited me.

But, as I almost ran down the slope, my eyes fixed on the village, my hill pony stopped, sniffed, and was persuaded to follow me only after a hard whack. Every ten or fifteen paces from this point he would halt, and when, for the tenth time, he kicked out I was more than annoyed and started

belabouring him. At this juncture the "ping" of a bullet rang above me, followed by a shrill challenge, "Hold, where goest thou?" This challenge echoed and re-echoed in the gullies; then silence.

What an outlandish Kurdish method it was, I thought. I of course stopped, but before I could gather sufficient intelligence to get my rifle out from under my voluminous, sheepskin coat another and yet another bullet spat past me to right and left, over and beyond, till I was surrounded by flying bullets, none of which seemed to be intended to hit me.

"Move not, nor fumble for thy fowling-piece!" shrieked another voice from behind a large boulder no more than fifty yards above me. And then, leaping, yelling men were upon me. Their curls hung over their shoulders, murderous-looking knives were stuck in their belts; their feet were unshod, and they all covered me with their rifles.

They then proceeded to disarm me, and not touching my pack on the pony ordered me to climb the rugged goat-track up the hill. Resistance being impossible I preceded this wild procession, and when I was not going quickly enough, or stumbled and fell, an occasional jab of their long knives kept me well up to whatever time they wished to set to get me to their lair.

Up and up and on I climbed, my captors gibbering gleefully, running up and jumping down in the manner of a war-dance, while I smarted under the thought of being so tied up and led like a goat to the altar of sacrifice, without as much as an opportunity of exchanging a single shot with these prowlers of the hills. And I, an Afghan, reared in the fields of powder and shot.

We had by now crept into the night, and the wild wind was becoming wilder at each step, but I had passed caring for the cold. My captors were clearly not brigands. They were such as do not touch the property of a captive, or deal more or less honourably by allowing their quarry to pit his skill against theirs at sniping. Their tactics, dress, weapons, language all breathed evil.

These benumbing conditions had so stupefied me that only when one of them thrust his paw-like hand under my chin, nearly twisting my head off my neck, did I realize a change of scenery, and that we had actually arrived at their den.

A dozen men sat under the shadow of an overhanging cliff, armed to the teeth; their wizened features were not exactly murderous but seemed to me, in my perilous condition, uncanny. They then beckoned me and I was taken to the mouth of a cave



A TYPICAL KURDISH FAQIR

round the edge of a precipice and which overlooked the valley.

The merriment amongst these men was extreme. "We have now got the cure! We must get it this night!" they kept repeating. That I was the cure was fairly evident, but in what manner I was at a loss to imagine. A cure for whom; a cure for what?

In the cave I was stripped of all my clothing; then two men rubbed melted fat all over my body and, after blindfolding me, they led me out of this smoky den into the chilly air outside.

I must then have passed through a labyrinth of passages, for I alternately experienced cold blasts of the open air and the smoky atmosphere within, till I heard a curious babel of tongues, half Turkish, half Kurdish; some jargon of these remote parts. This faded into a hush as I came into a very close atmosphere blended with an aroma of melted fat, aromatics and a foul smell of wet sheepskins.

When the bandage was removed from my eyes I could not for a moment focus my vision in the glare of two smoky torches which blazed on the right and the left of a grotesquely-dressed old man. Another grey-bearded ruffian sat on the piles of Kurdish, felt rugs. Both wore huge sheepskin coats, and half a

dozen or more attendants, two of them were no other than my captors, hung about the door.

But what appalled me most was the sight of blood with which a man had besmeared his right hand and who was then engaged in roasting a goat's skull over a big fire in the corner. I was tied up again, and to a stack near the fire. A sort of dwarf, iron tripod was placed over the fire, and on the top of this was placed an earthen bowl, whilst a rope hung loosely above it from a tree trunk wedged across the ceiling of the cave.

"Here is a young man of sunburnt complexion, O Hakim," barked the chief to the other old man. "How dost thou propose to produce the cure from him for my ailments?" The Hakim (doctor) rising, approached the rope that hung from the beam; examined the tripod; clanged together two iron pegs, and looked me up and down. This took about ten minutes—or was it ten years—after which, adopting a ghoulish smile, he addressed his patron in a brazen voice. "This man is to be hung by the feet to the beam, the iron pegs are to be driven through his skull, and what juice trickles down into the bowl must simmer over a slow fire to make thy medicine, and to cure thee for ever and ever, my holy master!"

To describe the then state of my mind is

impossible. I had at this stage begun to lose all feeling. But whether I felt hot or cold, alive or dead, I cannot now say. Grunts of approval around me were all that I now remember. What the chief replied my ears failed to record. Somebody was feeling me all over; my bones, flesh and hair were being carefully examined, and the tripod stood gruesomely waiting all the while.

I must have fainted at this point, and what passed afterwards I do not know, till I found strong hands massaging my neck. Then my eyes were bandaged again, and I was being led by two men. "Wake up, wake up," they growled in my ears, "thy life is safe. Thou has moles on thy arms, and therefore the medicine man finds thee unfit for making a cure."

My relief at this speech can be well imagined, and it became greater still when not only my clothes, but what little money I then possessed, was handed back to me. That these men were not of the ordinary type of brigand was evident by this act, but what they actually were I could never afterwards discover, though I made many inquiries.

From now onward, and for hours together, I stumbled down the hilly slopes, led by some of these men; and then, all of a sudden, I was abandoned.

A wild wind was blowing, but my denumbed hands came to the rescue, and, untying the bandages from my eyes, I found myself back again at the bend of the road from which they had taken me captive. So I struggled down to the Kurdish village I had seen before my capture, where the headman, after hearing my narrative, hummed and hawed a great deal, and stroked his beard.

"It was Allah's will that this should have happened," he said. "Yes, many know of the 'devil's den somewhere up yonder where an infidel, brigand chief lies ill and seeks a cure. Through the human, holy oil as he calls it. None but the demented now use that road up the hill."

CHAPTER XII

THE KINGDOM OF BAGHDAD

VERY much battered in condition and finance I eventually reached Mosal, and then Khanay Qeen, from whence I took the train down to Baghdad. For if I was now to continue on my pilgrimage to Mecca the easiest way would now be by way of Basra, Karachi, Bombay and Jeddeh: because, unhappy, political relations between Iraq and Nejd had rendered a traveller's journey in a south-westerly direction somewhat unsafe.

But once in Baghdad I felt a sense of security and peacefulness. Something of the dread engendered by the perils I had been through was lifted, and I roamed unmolested through the streets where the Khalifs had trod during the days of the great glory of Islam.

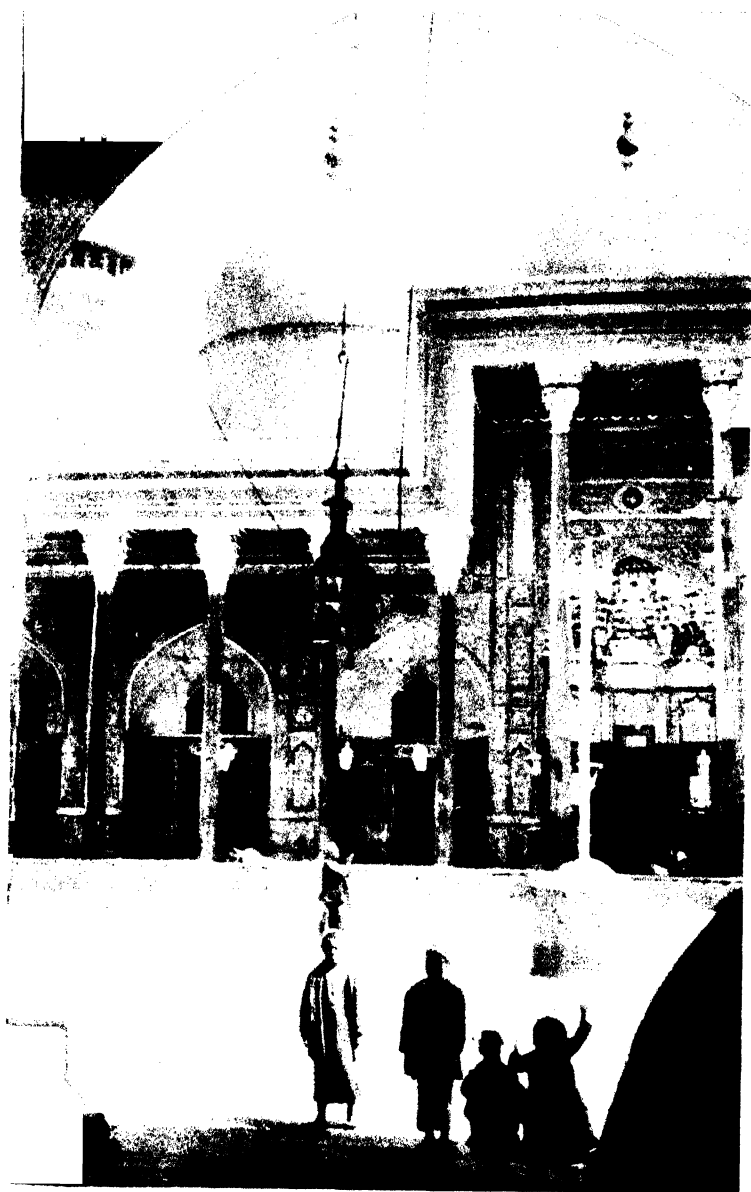
Here both the British and the Arab I found engaged in the great experiment of giving Iraq what that country seems never to have had, a sense of nationhood; and what struck me very forcibly was that they were being very successful in their task.

The Baghdad Sore has been banished by the

medical men there; new roads are being laid, and organization is moving apace. Those tortuous lanes of Baghdad, where danger lurked, are now cleaned up; departmental as well as private buildings were being constructed; but the mud of Baghdad, which makes its streets such an inconvenience during the wet weather, is there as usual, and the dance-halls and Casinos overlook the river!

Iraq's great problem is, of course, the sparseness of its population. In a country of about three times the size of England and Wales there are no more than 3,000,000 souls; and whilst the agricultural openings are no less here than in the Nile Valley, the Egyptian population of the riverain area is fully four times as much as that of Mesopotamia. This, in itself, indicates the comparatively undeveloped potentialities of Iraq.

In many respects, these three Vilayats of the old Turkish Empire hold the richest future for the scientific handling of agriculture. The dates of Basra are world-renowned; grapes, even oranges, are to be found in abundance, and wheat and barley can be sown on a large scale. With the further development of irrigation it has been authoritatively proved that this can become one of the largest cotton growing areas in the world, not even excepting America or



THE SHIA SHRINE OF KAZIMAN NEAR BAGHDAD

India. It is, for instance, within the capacity of the land to export no less than 3,000,000 bales a year; nor are the mineral deposits of Iraq unknown.

The tapping of these natural resources was never seriously attempted—why they were not sufficiently worked before the war may be beside the question—but with the advent of the present regime Iraq has entered upon a new era of advancement.

The very first task to which King Feisal's Government addressed herself was the improvement of communications, as it was quickly realized that the development of a country of 150,000 square miles very largely depended upon good roads and bridges, and moreover upon modern methods of transport. In the olden days it took seven days to reach Basra from Baghdad, but now the distance is covered in less than twenty-two hours. There was then only a fragment of 170 miles of Berlin-Baghdad railway in Mesopotamia; the mileage covered to-day exceeds 816. The picturesque Arabana—a horse-drawn conveyance—has given place to motor-cars. At least 300 bridges have been built, and the floating bridges have been increased from the nine of pre-war time to seventeen.

When, before the war, Sir William Willcocks surveyed Iraq, and drew up a scheme of irrigation

for the benefit of the cotton growing belt between the Tigris and the Euphrates, it was thought that an immediate advantage of his labours would be taken. But it languished, and in the absence, at that date, of any organized irrigation department beyond a half-hearted attempt at the construction of Hindiyah Barrage, the entire irrigation was left to flood, with the result that, when the barrage fell later into the hands of the Iraq Government, it was found to be totally unworthy, and cost the present administration some six Lakhs of rupees to put in order. In addition, four more canals have been opened, which totally cover an area of half a million acres.

The army of the country was thoroughly organized, and, although certain matters of defence still remain unsolved, a great step forward has been taken. The British help in this connection, as well as in other spheres of administration, has been freely sought. One great advantage that Iraq possesses is that, at any given moment, its standing army can be augmented by local tribesmen of the desert, who are both brave and war-like. At present, it is agreed, however, that the strength of the Iraq army should be 15,000. Allied to it are the improved conditions which bring internal security, and maintained by the

police of the country. The total strength, both mounted and otherwise, of the police is 6,000 men, and when the extent of the country, over which they maintain the law is considered, their part is highly commendable.

Education, likewise, has progressed to an unbelievable degree in Iraq. In place of 160 primary schools with 6,470 pupils, there are now 228 primary schools with 22,712 pupils. Adult education, which was unheard of in Mesopotamia of old, is now an established fact. Female education, too, is receiving its due attention, for there are no less than 31 girls' schools and 4,055 students. These figures must be judged comparatively with other Oriental countries, and especially in regard to those nations of the East with whom the idea of self-determination is just appearing, after a protracted struggle with the ancient thralldom of its autocratic rulers.

The news of the find of an "oil-well" with enormous capacity, news which startled the economic circles of two hemispheres, proves once again that the efforts directed towards the exploitation of Mesopotamia were not wholly an endeavour of plant the rose in the sand and then expect the flower to bloom in the desert.

A healthy excitement over this latest and pro-

digious oil find is already evident to those who read their morning papers intelligently. Its vibration was said to have been noticeable in Wall Street within a very few hours of the news.

But its discovery never truly surprised students of Middle Eastern history. Oil in great volume was always expected to be found there, for bitumen was used as mortar as far back as 4,000 B.C., at Tel-el-Ubaid, and its mention in the Bible for caulking the Ark of Noah shows that the idea was familiar to the ancient Jews. Even before the Roman legions passed farther East, the inflammatory nature of Mesopotamian petroleum was demonstrated by primitive refining at Kirkuk.

But it was not till 1895 that Jacques de Morgan brought the oil potentialities before the Western world, and within the last few years, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company has also struck oil there, so that it may not be long before pipe-lines are laid right up to the Mediterranean seaboard from Iraq. The Turkish Petroleum Company, to which a concession was granted in 1925, has been more fortunate in owning this rich tapping of oil, and large royalties will now flow into the Iraq Exchequer since the boom in oil, the Government's share being four shillings to every ton of oil produced. There is also said to be

no limit to the quantity of the oil which the recent find is capable of yielding.

A review of conditions obtaining in Iraq, and the manner in which that young nation, under the leadership of the enlightened and romantic figure of King Feisal, has responded to the general cause of the world's progress, which augurs well for its future, and Great Britain has every reason to congratulate herself in having assisted her "ward" so honourably as practically to have brought her to the highest degree of cultural and economic advancement.

I feel that independence is richly deserved by the people of Iraq, and with the splendid record of achievement which characterizes the labours of His Majesty King Feisal, the cause of Anglo-Mesopotamian rapprochement is practically assured.

Journeying from Baghdad to Basra I passed a desolate tract of hard sand, but cultivation efforts have been made in places even here. At Basra I took a boat to Karachi, ultimately landing at Bombay, and there bided my time till I could start once more on my long road to Mecca.

Whilst waiting at Bombay for a pilgrim boat I visited an institute where they farm the cobra, one of India's deadliest snakes. This snake takes a great annual toll of life in this country, but the institute in

question provides a practically certain remedy for cobra poison, though, to obtain the remedy, it is necessary to have a sufficient supply of the poison, and for that purpose it runs a snake-farm.

The reptiles are kept in wooden boxes, and are attended to by an Indian orderly when a supply of venom is required.

When this is needed a cobra is selected, and, a syringe full of the cobra-bite remedy having been prepared in case of accident, the cobra is "milked" of its poison in the following manner.

The orderly, armed with a bamboo cane about four feet long, tips the cobra out of its box on to a piece of matting. The reptile coils itself, inflates its hood, hisses, and, with its tongue flickering like a flame, looks round for a way of escape. Eventually with head thrust forward it glides off across the matting.

The assistant, who has been awaiting this movement, then stoops and with his right hand lays the rod lightly but firmly on the cobra's neck, pinning the snake to the ground. With his left hand he quickly grasps the animal behind the jaws and raises its head. The cobra is now in a violent temper and hisses and lashes its tail with fury. Then the assistant grips the tail with his right hand, which, by this time, has

released the cane, and stands erect, the reptile outstretched between his two hands. Another assistant who has been standing ready with a clean wine-glass, the top of which is covered with a piece of washleather, now thrusts the rim between the snake's jaws. It opens its mouth widely, the poison fangs descend from the upper jaw, pierce the leather, and a golden trickle of the venom can be seen flowing into the glass.

When the venom ceases to run the glass is placed on a side table, and a glass funnel picked up in its stead. This is cautiously introduced into the cobra's gullet and an egg-fillip is poured into it.

When the astonished and now thoroughly angry reptile has swallowed this last indignity the funnel is removed, he is dropped into his box, the lid is quickly slammed down and secured, and he is borne off hissing and scraping until he is again required.

The venom is then dried, and varying quantities are injected into horses, whose blood ultimately develops substances capable of making the poison harmless. The blood is removed periodically, purified, and stored in sealed glass capsules. It is in that form that it arrives at the hospitals and dispensaries in India, where it is known as antivenine.

When a case of snake-bite arrives at a dispensary

the patient is given an injection of this antivenine, and his chances of recovery are increased a hundred-fold. The antivenine, however, is only efficacious when both the wound and the antivenine came from the same species of snake.

There were other sights, too, in Bombay, but my mind was so fixed upon my one great purpose—the pilgrimage to the Cradle of Islam—that I felt I had roamed long enough in its quest. But soon the boat which was to take me to Mecca arrived in Bombay, and I was ready.

CHAPTER XIII

MECCA AT LAST

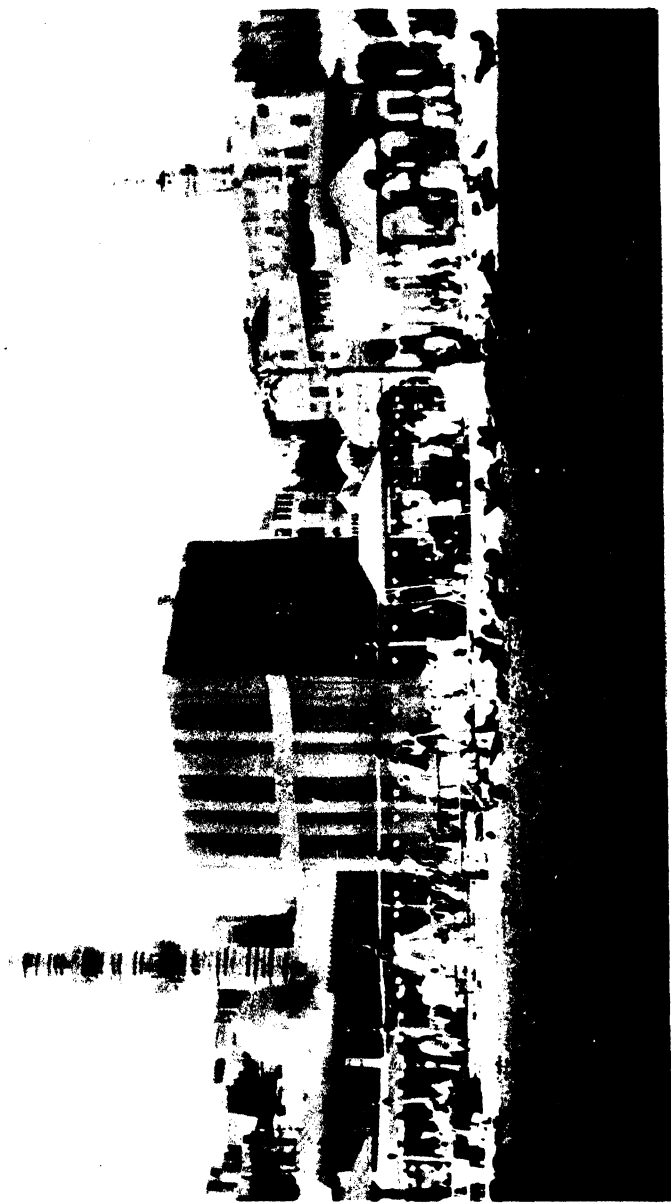
IN a fierce midday heat, enveloped in clouds of choking dust, sweating and with jaded faces, a heterogeneous mass of Moslim pilgrims plodded their way to Bombay harbour. Afghans, Persians, Javanese, Indians and Uzbegs, all staring at one another and endeavouring to understand the diverse languages they had never heard before.

On the arrival of the medical officer the babel of tongues died away; all sat on the floor of the shed and were vaccinated. But as soon as a medical certificate was granted, and the pilgrim was free to move, he could be seen hurrying along the passageway with his left shirt-sleeve rolled up. Where was he going I wondered, till I noticed him behind the shed washing the wound inflicted by the vaccinator. Many think that the lymph is an impurity of the cow, and hence not fit to be absorbed by the skin of a "faithful" bound for Mecca.

Close by was the quay, alongside it the pilgrim

ship for Jeddeh, so that when the final word "depart" was given by the medical authorities there was a rush to the gangway. And what a stampede it was! Stalwart Pathans of the frontier, weak and ill-fed Bengalis, sleepy eyed men of Bokhara, veiled women carrying children in their arms, all made one dash. They carried their valuables along with them, in sacks, in crudely made tin boxes or bulging baskets insecurely tied with ropes. The sacks, however, predominated as items of "portable luggage" intended for "Cabin only." All were excited, and the noise and smell of the East blended with the sanctified air of the pilgrim ship. They rushed the gangway; people pushing against the sacks; bundles and baskets pushing into the people. A water receptacle peeping out of a sack was pushed out by the jolting crowd, and then slipping from the hands of its owner fell into the sea. Thus the narrow gangway led the "faithful" on to the deck and down beneath its cavernous hatches. Once aboard they dumped themselves anywhere and anyhow, lay panting and tired, only thankful for the fact that at least one of the worst parts of the journey was over.

Then came three shrill blasts from the siren, the thud of the engines; we slowly moved away from the



THE SHRINE OF THE BLACK STONE IN THE CENTRE OF THE HARAM, MECCA

Indian shores amidst the cries of "Allaho—Akbar, Allaho—Akbar!" (God is great, God is great!) Had I realized before embarking on the *Gurgistan* what my experiences on board, and on the journey, were to be, I might perhaps have paused on the gangway, although the gangway itself was not exactly a peaceful place for meditation. Yet, as a pious Moslim, I had a craving to visit the holy city of my faith, and also to join the Grand Moslim Conference at Mecca. Taking, therefore, little or no account of the future, believing in what is written is written, relying on the philosophy of my fathers, I resolved to face the discomforts and possible perils inseparable from a pilgrimage to Mecca, as stoically as possible.

Existence on board, to one used to the ordinary comforts of life was, to say the least of it, harassing. And although much has recently been done to improve conditions, yet the devotees were packed like pilchards in a tin, and as they were compelled to make their devotions and ablutions where they sat one had to become expert in dodging the slops so liberally broadcast by the devout.

The worst phase of the voyage began on the third day after we had left Karachi for Jeddeh, for practically every pilgrim was in the throes of *mal de mer*: and one of them, who, only the day before, had

told me that he could not be sea-sick, was prostrated and prayed loudly for death to release him.

These shouting, and harrying scenes ceased to some extent when the sky became grey, the wind swept the vessel, and when the waves beat her sides with more than ordinary force. Then corpse-like men lay about the decks on their charcoal sacks, on coiled ropes, everywhere, uttering not a word, hardly interested in existence and refusing all food and drink. They thought an evil spirit had come upon the ship. But it takes more than a rough sea to hide life altogether, for as soon as the weather subsided, these corpse-like souls rolled up their beddings, sat up and cooked their food. The Persians made tea, the Bengalis skinned fish, the Pathans were busy with Palaws of excellent flavour. During their spell of sea-sickness the pilgrims had lost all clear idea of their purpose, but on recovering, they soon remembered the solemn reason that had induced them to journey to the city of their childhood's dreams and life-long prayers.

The air on board the ship was then "thick with religion"; prayer-carpets were spread; recitations of the Koran were chanted; doctors of theology were busy reading to the devotees those chapters of the Holy Book of Islam which related to this part of the

journey of the pilgrimage. In the afternoons religious discussions took place, even political; and both used to end where they began.

And thus the life of the faithful on board a pilgrim ship was spent, till, one day, soon after dawn, the captain came on to our deck and pointed out to us in the distant haze a dark blue line—the Holy Land of Islam! The Arabian coast! The port of Jeddeh! We could hardly speak for excitement. Little by little the blue coast became clearer, and we stood watching it dressed in our Ahrams—the regulation pilgrim costume—till the white city of minarets and domes lay as if cut out in marble.

The ship dropped anchor some two miles from the shore. No ship can go nearer than this as the reefs are very numerous. Many negotiated the journey from ship to shore in tiny sailing boats, which were tossed like cockle-shells in the off-shore surf.

The first sight of Jeddeh gripped me, and as a Moslim I gazed at it with pleasure mingled with awe and reverence. Beyond that city, at a distance of fifty miles or more, lay Mecca, the goal of my hopes. The Holy of Holies of every Moslim. Life's dream, I thought, had at last been realized. The pallor of my face and the furtive tears that dimmed my eyes were at any rate indications of my emotion. The scene was

strangely familiar, for had I not faced the Holy City five times every day of my life in prayer. Absorbed in these thoughts I remained in Jeddeh for the night, and on the following day started out towards Mecca.

Those of us who were the guests of the King were bundled into a large Ford car, and told that by this means we were to travel to Mecca.

We had not proceeded far when a halt was made at the reputed tomb of Eve. Curious as to the grave of my great ancestress, I got out to examine it.

Eve must have been a lady of formidable proportions, for the original grave, I was told, was some eight feet long. It was perhaps as well, therefore, that she had not survived to welcome us in the flesh, for although it is rumoured that we Moslims have an eye for ladies of heroic proportions we draw the line at the titanic. But I was told that the grave had mysteriously extended itself by the time I arrived to its present gigantic dimensions. On payment of a fee, I learned, one could receive an oracular message from the buried progenitress of suffering humanity. This was of course supplied by a confederate in an underground crypt, who, for a shilling or two, droned out a "prophecy." Fortunately the evil practice has been stopped since the advent of the Wahabis.

As we trundled over the sandy track, the grilling



AN ARAB HOUSE IN HIJAZ

heat of the desert almost overpowered us. I was dressed in the traditional Ahram, which consists of two sheets, one for the upper part of the body, another for the lower, and knotted together, as pins or sewing are frowned on by Moslim law. In accordance with immemorial custom, too, my head was shaved and unprotected from the merciless sun. To make matters worse no water was to be had. After twenty-five miles of this torture, with parched lips and scorched limbs, we drew up at the post of Bahra, where, we were told, there was a well, but the water was undrinkable.

Fever was already on me, and when I saw our driver dip a tin and drink greedily, I felt a keen sense of nausea. It was impossible to drink, so I crawled back into the Ford, and we jolted on for some distance, until one of the rear wheels sunk deep in a sand-heap.

Here we alighted, and strove to move the venerable car, but to no purpose, and much to the contemptuous amusement of a passing bedouin, who, from the back of his swift-trotting camel, jeered at us unmercifully.

"It serves you right for bringing that creation of Satan into the sacred land," he yelled. "Why can't you travel on camel-back like other folk? See, I can make my camel stop when I want and go when I wish

him to. Take that iron devilment back to the Devil, who made it." And so he passed on his way with a sardonic laugh, but his commentary rather reminded me of what I had heard concerning the jeers made at the expense of the pioneers of motoring in the 'nineties.

After an hour's exhausting labour we managed to liberate our car and proceed once more. This time I took the wheel myself, and, Ford or no Ford, made the old machine career over the desert sands as never before did one of its peace-loving inventor's make. So we raced past creeping caravans, scattering the water-sellers and guards at village posts, until at last we came within sight of Mecca.

By this time I was well in the grip of fever, and it was with pounding head and swaying legs that later I negotiated the sevenfold circumambulation of the sacred Kaaba; that Holy of Holies, believed to have been built by Adam, and which contains the sacred black stone set in silver. The Haram, the sacred enclosure in which it is situated, is surrounded on all sides by graceful colonnades, surmounted by white domes, forming Mecca's sacred mosque.

On the day I made the sevenfold circumambulation it was crowded by thousands of pilgrims from all parts of the East, eager to kiss the holy relic, access

to which was only to be had after a rough-and-tumble. I succeeded at last, and was glad to get out and away from that scrimmage of excited devotees.

From the moment the pilgrim enters Mecca to the time of his departure he is kept in a fever of excitement and pious frenzy. Ceremony after ceremony claims his constant and unfaltering attention. He is for hours wedged in amid swaying and seething crowds.

One of the most arduous rites is that of passing seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwa, the alleged tombs of Hagar and Ishmael; a distance of perhaps three hundred yards, which is known as the Sai Ceremony, and by which one may acquire much merit. The road is not narrow but is constantly crowded with pilgrims, so that one is hustled unmercifully. Add to this prayers five times a day, and one has not much time to see the sights of Mecca, though there is really not very much to see.

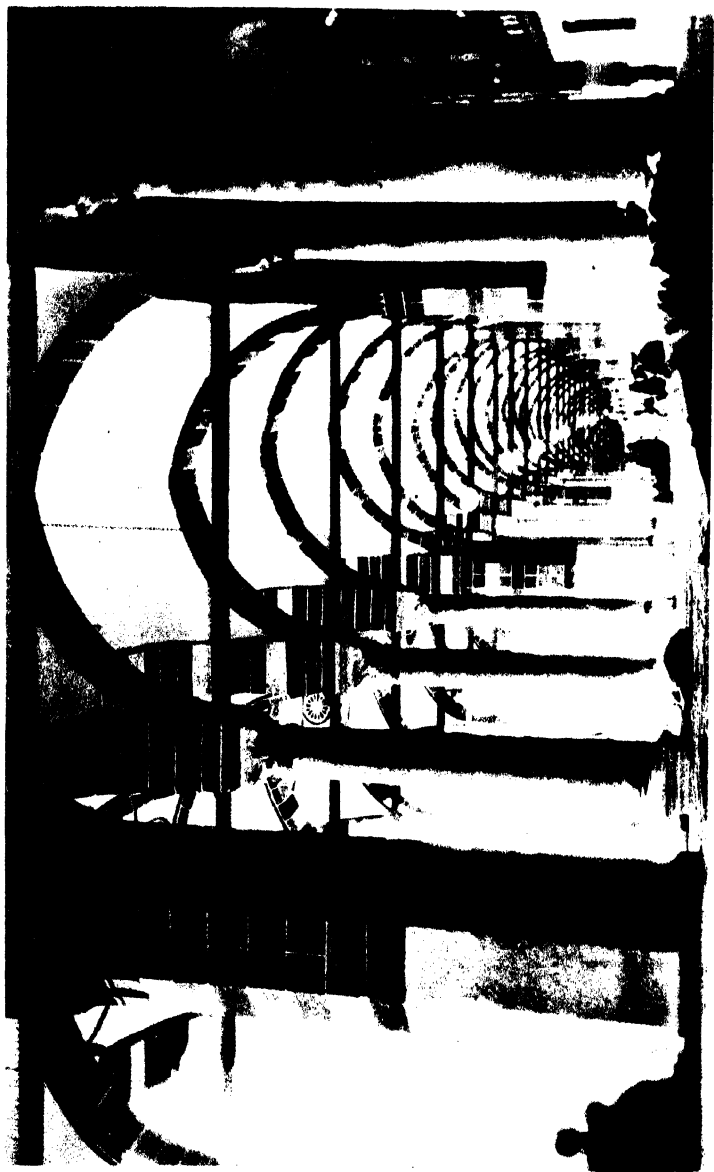
Moreover Ibn Saud has jealously banned all diabolical amusements. Mecca is drier than Milwaukee by many degrees, and to light a cigarette is to call down anathemas from pious Moslims.

The most striking picture in Mecca is that provided by the vivid and colourful life of its bazaars. The most celebrated of these is the Soayqa, which occupies

one side of the Haram, and which has a great reputation throughout the East for its fine silks, its wonderful beadwork and its rich and choice perfumes. The latter are a necessity of life in Mecca, where the sanitation of the rest-houses is nothing less than execrable. Indeed scented woods have constantly to be burned in these overcrowded houses to keep down the strong and constantly rising effluvia of overcrowded humanity.

The purchase of an article in Mecca is scarcely the same sort of business as in Fifth Avenue or Regent Street. Goods in the bazaars are unticketed, and if you fancy anything the merchant will ask six or eight times its value. Of course the turbaned merchant well knows that you will at once depreciate it, which you proceed to do, if you are skilful, with a flow of rhetoric which bamboozles him. But when he has recovered he comes back at you with an eloquence of praise for his goods worthy of a Hafiz. So it goes on until one or the other is exhausted. On one occasion I bought a melon which the merchant assured me was "sweeter than the honeycombs on the hills of Paradise." On finding the inside blacker than Eblis I returned it to the seller, who looked at me pityingly.

"Oh, my unwise brother," he chanted, "the melon



SHRINE OF THE KABA IN MECCA

was made by Allah. Why not complain to him about it? His house is hard by!"

One might describe Mecca under Wahabi rule as a Calvinistic city; the metropolis of the Moslim purists. It has no lighter side to its austerities. Indeed, Mecca should be nothing else. Yet the very weirdness of its crowded and enthusiastic life, and the sight of thousands of devotees massed together from all the lands of the East, cannot fail to arouse a lasting sense of the picturesque and the devout never to be effaced.

During my visit I had the privilege of a long interview with His Majesty Ibn Saud, the Napoleon of Arabia, from whom I learned much regarding the conditions in the country. His hopes for the future are great, and he speaks modestly of his victories over the "unfaithful." But he undoubtedly has his hands full with his own turbulent subjects, the Wahabis, who are looked at askance in most Moslim countries.

Will Mecca remain the metropolis of Islam? That, I should say, entirely depends on the conduct of its present occupants towards the thousands of pilgrims who still regard it as the Rome of the East. But it is of considerable significance to note that the Grand Moslim Conference which I attended at Mecca, has now definitely decided to have a railway

line laid between Jeddeh and Mecca, then to carry it farther north to Medina, and thus link up with the famous Hijaz Railway.

A scheme of this kind would not only be of great benefit to the pilgrims from the East and Egypt, but has enormous commercial advantages. Trade could then be opened with Iraq, Syria and even Egypt, for no less than 100,000 devotees visit the Holy Cities every year, and catering for their demands alone is a good proposition. Yet the sightseer, the winter-resort man, may not go to Mecca to escape the English fog and mist, unless he is a pious Moslim. And so at last ended my long pilgrimage. From life I need nothing more. I have been to Mecca, the cradle of my faith.

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